

Transgender Experiences Beyond the Binary:
A Phenomenological Study of Arizonans with Non-Binary Gender Identities

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explores the question: *What are the lived experiences of Arizonans who identify their gender identities as 'non-binary'?* ('non-binary' defined here as anyone who identifies their gender as something other than 'always and exclusively male or always and exclusively female'). The study explores the lived realities of four non-binary identified transgender people living in Arizona. Each participant took a short survey and conducted a 45-minute in-person interview, conducted through phenomenological questioning to evoke deep descriptions of experience. After analyzing the results through feminist hermeneutic phenomenology, this study suggests that the experience of non-binary gender identity presents an essential pattern of cultivating self-realization. The essential themes of internal recognition, external presentation, and movement toward wellness fell into this pattern. The United States has conceptualized transgender identity in many ways, from pathologizing to politicizing, to medically affirming views. Although the literature on this topic is quite small, there is no doubt that non-binary transgender people exist in U.S. public life. Ultimately, if non-binary people are to find affirming paths toward self-realization, they must be heard from their own experiences in their own voices.

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CHAPTER 1
JUSTIFICATION FOR STUDY

Introduction

Throughout world history human cultures have experienced the phenomenon of gender and organized their societies around it in countless different ways. As a transgender researcher in the United States, I am interested in the ways in which individuals' experiences of gender and identity interact with the gendered expectations and social structures of their time and place. The goal of this study is to find out more about the lived experiences of individuals living in the United States who describe their gender identity as 'non-binary'. Throughout this study, non-binary gender identity is defined as any gender identity that is neither always/exclusively male nor always/exclusively female. This definition could include (but is not limited to) people who define their gender as: partially male and partially female, neither male nor female, a mixture of male and female, or sometimes male and sometimes female.

It is important to keep in mind the difference between gender expression and gender identity in the pages to follow. While gender expression is "the way we show our gender to the world around us through such things as clothing, hairstyles, and mannerisms" (Baum, 2017), gender identity is "our internal experience and naming of our gender" (Baum 2017). Everyone has a gender expression and a gender identity, and for some people these align while for others they do not always align. Most social science studies about transgender people to date operate within a binary that is focused on transgender women and transgender men and have been particularly concerned with the

challenges these two groups face as they try to integrate into U.S. culture's two categories of men/males and women/females. This study is concerned with the experiences of a smaller but equally important subset of the transgender community in the U.S. – those who do not fit into either category of our cultural gender binary. The methodologies of feminism and phenomenology will inform this study's methods and analysis.

Importance of Researching Underrepresented Communities

By virtue of numbers alone, non-binary transgender people make up a very small percentage of the population. The most recent estimates of the transgender population place the number of transgender U.S. Americans at around 1.39 million, or just 0.5 percent of the total population (Flores, et. al., 2016). This estimate includes transgender men, transgender women, and people with non-binary/genderqueer, genderfluid, or agender identities. The largest survey of transgender U.S. Americans to date, the U.S. Trans Survey, found that just over 30 percent of their respondents identified as non-binary – putting this group of people at an even smaller percentage of the population (James, et. al, 2016).

We know from past research on underrepresented communities that these numbers are likely low, and that it is not always safe or accessible for people to self-report their identity in these large-scale studies. It is likely that these numbers will increase over time, not necessarily because there will be more non-binary transgender people in the U.S. than before, but because over time it will become safer and easier for non-binary people to discover their identity and share it with their families and communities. Studies that present realistic, multi-dimensional, and self-authored accounts

of non-binary experience will be crucial for developing a safe environment as well as medical and legal rights for non-binary transgender people in the near future.

Phenomenon of Non-Binary Gender Identity

Outside of the United States, there is a long global history of cultural recognition of genders other than male or female. For centuries, many cultures have recognized people who were assigned male at birth but take on the dress, roles, and mannerisms of women and who do not identify as male or female. Some examples of these groups include the indigenous *Muxe* in Mexico, Indian/South Asian *Hijras*, and Pacific Islanders' *Leiti*, *Fa'afafine*, and *Mahu* (Mirandé, 2015).

Even today, there is a growing global recognition of people with non-binary gender identities. Various studies were conducted between 2013 and 2015 in the Netherlands, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Israel to gain demographic information about the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) population. Across the studies, as little as two percent and as much as 35 percent of the thousands of LGBTQ people surveyed in each sample self-identified their gender as non-binary (Richards, et. al., 2016). Legal recognition is advancing quickly as well, and currently eight countries offer some third gender category for legal identification documents or birth records for intersex and non-transgender people. Denmark, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand have already adopted the 'X' marking (as opposed to only 'M' and 'F' options) for the gender/sex designation on all forms of legal identification, specifically for non-binary people (Macarow, 2015).

It is clear that non-binary people have existed, do exist, and will continue to exist in public life and culture around the world, but still so few U.S. Americans have any real

understanding of what it is like to identify with and live in the world as a gender other than male or female. Until non-binary people feel safe enough to speak our truth and gain recognition in legal and social spaces, we will have to rely on the accounts of the few to give some insight into the experiences and life worlds of the many.

Researcher Position

When we learn to think of everything in a gendered way, it becomes nearly impossible to conceive of a world without a gender binary (Hesse-Biber, 2014). In *Feminist Research Practice*, the authors discuss tensions among feminist theorists over how to theorize gender (within the context of feminist post-structuralism and a culturally dominant binary system of gender). Contemporary U.S. culture is catching on to the long-standing idea that gender exists outside of a binary and that the categories we know are socially constructed. Feminist writer Luce Irigaray suggests pursuing gender-neutral language in order to form identities that are not bound by gender stereotypes and expectations, and to see every *individual* as just that, but we are still a long way from normalizing gender-neutral language in spaces where children learn to organize their social worlds (Irigaray & Whitford, 1996). What starts when we are young follows us into our adult lives. For example, the structure of academic writing is still very much reliant on a system built from the modernist (and androcentric) values of logic, reason, and empirical evidence, and many academics argue that any attempt to be grammatically correct would still require using “he or she” over “they” when referring to an anonymous or hypothetical individual subject.

As a feminist researcher who was raised and socialized within these norms, I must be self-reflexive and analyze my own position. But as a non-binary-identifying

transgender person, this means I must grapple with my longing to free myself of gendered expectations (based on both my female sex-assignment at birth and my male-appearing gender expression and masculine-of-center gender identity), while also being aware of how my experiences with both of these social categories (and others) have shaped my privilege, worldview, values, and epistemology. Essentially, to be a feminist academic today I must analyze how binary gender shapes and affects me, even while my personal mission is to live a life outside of these categories and to take away some of their cultural value. I will further explore my worldview as a researcher in chapter 2, as I lay out a historical and geographical context for this study, as well as in chapter 6, where I will begin the presentation of this study's findings with a statement of my own experience within the phenomenon of non-binary gender identity.

CHAPTER 2

MAPPING A CENTURY OF GENDER IN THE UNITED STATES

In order to best understand the lived experiences of transgender people in the U.S. today, and in order to see how context affects this study, we must first examine how our national conversation about gender has evolved to its current state. To accomplish this, I will attempt to trace the genealogy of discourse surrounding transgender Americans over the past 100 years. I of course cannot claim the following account to be complete or exhaustive in any way. I will instead highlight only some key moments and major shifts in how U.S. culture evolved in its conception of gender. It is also crucial to note that both the scientific and academic conversations on gender have been historically steeped in white/male/upper-class privilege and therefore leave out many voices. Nonetheless these voices are still significant for the role they played in shaping our current moment for transgender U.S. Americans.

Here I will attempt to answer the questions: How have U.S. Americans changed our national conception of gender identity over the past century? And: What might this genealogy tell us about the future of gender in the U.S.? A quick disclaimer: in the pages to follow, when I am describing what happened during each decade, I use the terms that were popular at those times, even if some may seem dated or offensive today. Similarly, the terms I am using today to describe the current landscape will likely be outdated at a future reading. In fact, I hope they will be; as this would be an indicator of cultural evolution.

Late 1910s to 1920s: Going Back One Hundred Years

One hundred years ago, the United States was experiencing the end of World War I and with it the beginnings of a great depression, heightened nationalism, and a fear of communist ideas. This wasn't exactly a fertile incubator for queer ideology - after all, medical and psychiatric professionals at this time thought of sex as a person's biologically innate and immutable distinction as either male or female, and they thought homosexuality was a mental disorder in need of a cure. Sigmund Freud's ideas were gaining in popularity and the Americans we might today label as LGBTQ were then living in fear of the price of discovery - public shaming at best and institutionalization at worst (Katz, 1976).

We can gain some insight into what this climate was like just after the turn of the century through the story of Alan Hart. In 1917, (then Alberta) Hart became one of the first known female-born Americans to request a hysterectomy for the purpose of female-to-male transition. The 27-year-old medical school graduate made an argument to doctor J. Allen Gilbert that she should be sterilized due to her same-sex attraction toward women. This was likely the only way that Hart could have convinced the doctor to perform a hysterectomy, given that same-sex attraction was pathologized at this time. Once the operation was complete however, Hart moved to a new city, changed his name to Alan, married a woman, and lived full-time as a man from then on, moving to a new city each time his birth-sex was discovered (Katz, 1976).

Now, it is important to note here that we cannot posthumously claim anyone to be transgender or transsexual who lived before these terms were coined and popularized. What we do know is that Hart had to pathologize himself in order for a doctor to treat

him because at that time American medical professionals had no concept for distinguishing biological sex from gender identity in diagnoses.

1930s: The First Sex Reassignment Surgeries

In the year 1930, ethnographer Leslie Spier published an account on his study of the Klamath American Indian tribe. He, as many ethnographers did at that time, observed the social culture of the tribe and then compared it to the lens of white European/colonial norms - finding their gender customs to be vastly different from those that he knew. In his report, he observed “men and women who for reasons that remain obscure take on the dress and habits of the opposite sex” (Katz, 1976, p. 323). He called these tribe members *transvestites* and ‘*berdaches*’ - a French slur for gay men (Katz, 1976) - and joined a long, disheartening legacy of white American academics pathologizing the gender systems of American Indian tribes. But even as his analysis placed judgment on the tribe’s social structure, it simultaneously brought further awareness of different systems of gender to academics in the U.S.

Three years after Spier’s ethnography was published, Lili Elbe’s private journal was translated from Danish into English and released in the U.S. - exposing American audiences to her story. A transgender woman, Elbe was one of the first known recipients of sex-reassignment surgery, which was attempted in 1931 in Germany and ultimately led to her death from surgical complications. Lili’s story has since been popularized by the 2015 film *The Danish Girl*, but at the time her surgeon Magnus Hirschfeld captivated the western world by performing the groundbreaking and controversial procedures that could ‘change a person’s sex’ (Beemyn, 2014; Erickson Schroth; 2014).

Michael Dillon was similarly pioneering as the first known transgender man to seek sex reassignment procedures. In 1939 in England, Dillon's doctor began treating him with testosterone to lessen menstrual bleeding. Dillon found that this treatment masculinized his body, making it possible for him to pass as a man - something he had desired all his life. A few years later he sought out a plastic surgeon who performed a successful mastectomy and helped him to legally change his name to Michael. In 1946, Harold Gillies - a doctor who reconstructed penises for wounded soldiers and intersex people - performed Dillon's phalloplasty, which consisted of 12 separate procedures (Erickson-Schroth, 2014; Kennedy, 2007). Hirschfeld's and Gillies' work inspired important medical experiments in the U.S. which led to greater understandings of the hormonal differences between natal males and females (Katz, 1976).

1940s: The Birth of the 'Transsexual'

By the 1940s, the U.S.'s gender roles were in flux as women were consigned back to their homes after working in the production lines and factories during World War II. After proving that there was no such thing as 'women's work' or 'men's work', gender dynamics in the post-war era started on a trajectory that would soon grow into the feminist movement through a greater understanding that biological sex was not a universal determinant of one's role in society, but that it greatly mattered in one's access to opportunities (Erickson-Schroth, 2014).

An even more explicit turning point of gender evolution in the post-war era was when American sexologist David Cauldwell first coined the term 'transsexual' in 1949. He defined transsexuals as those who "feel they *belong* to the other sex, (and who) want to *be* and *function* as members of the opposite sex, not only to appear as such" - a

definition that closely resembles the one we use today (Beemyn, 2014, p. 507). This distinguished transsexual people as different from transvestites and homosexuals (the then-popular terms for those who cross-dressed and those who had same-sex attractions respectively) for the first time. It should be noted however that Cauldwell, even as he coined this phrase and seemed to understand transsexual people, was not sympathetic to those who wanted to transition. He “believed that transsexuals were mentally ill and saw gender-affirming surgeries as mutilation and criminal action” (Beemyn, 2014, p. 507). His views give us a very clear picture of the social stigma and binary framework that were firmly attaching themselves to views of transgender identity at this time, and that would prove difficult to *detach* in the decades to come.

1950s: Early Distinctions Between Gender and Sex

The 50s brought transgender Americans into the media spotlight for the first time when a WWII Army veteran named George Jorgensen left the United States for Denmark and returned as Christine in 1952. When news of Christine Jorgensen’s sex-change surgery (as it was popularly called then) hit the press, the headlines read ‘Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty’. Against her wishes she became an international spectacle and in her autobiography she derides the press for placing her story on the front page instead of important international news like coverage of the Korean War and Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation (Beemyn, 2014, p. 508). Her visibility led her to become an early spokesperson for transgender people and many in the community have since written about how important her visibility was to them at that time (Erickson-Schroth, 2014). Jorgensen’s visibility was even more interesting given her own personal views about gender. She said once in an interview: “You seem to assume that every person is either a

man or a woman... (when) each person is actually both in varying degrees” (Meyerowitz, 1980, p. 98). She was known to make the point often that she was more female than male but that she, like all people, had male *and* female within her. This early look at the nuance of gender identity was visionary, and a point that she does not get credit for often enough.

During the time that Christine Jorgensen was the height of public fascination, John Money published his essay *An Examination of Some Basic Sexual Concepts*. In it he outlined six dimensions of sex: assigned sex, external genital morphology, internal reproductive structures, hormonal/secondary sex characteristics, gonadal sex, and chromosomal sex (Money, 1955). This nuanced model of biological sex argued that there were more variables to a person’s sexed body than the simple male/female dichotomy denotes. This research was seen by some as a stepping-stone toward greater medical recognition of intersex people at that time (even though Money went on to perform hugely unethical ‘corrective’ surgeries on intersex babies in an attempt to normalize them). Beyond the six dimensions, Money outlined a *seventh* dimension that is perhaps even more significant than all the rest combined. The 7th dimension he added to the list was: *gender role and orientation* as either male or female (Money, 1955).

This was incredibly important because it was one of the first recognitions that a person’s internally felt sense of gender is a component all people possess in early development and is something distinct from their anatomical sex characteristics. Money saw a person’s gender role as encompassing the behaviors, interests, and self-reported identification a person had with the masculine or feminine (Money 1955). But it cannot be ignored that this breakthrough distinction of ‘gender role’ was still considered to be an

extension of a person's biological sex and was expected to match the other sex characteristics as male or female in 'healthy' people.

1960s: Organizing Around Shared Identity

Conceptions of trans identity majorly evolved when Robert Stoller coined the term *Gender Identity* in his 1968 essay *Sex and Gender*. Stoller defined gender identity as a person's core sense of being male or female that develops separately from their social rearing and is concretely determined by adolescence. In his words, gender identity is a "force at work that (is) powerful enough to contradict (one's) anatomy and environment" (Stoller, 1968, p. 73). He was forward thinking enough to recognize that male transvestites had a different gender identity than transsexual women, but his analysis of gender identity does not entirely hold up today.

For instance, Stoller believed that gender identity develops based on the level of attachment a child makes with their¹ mother or father in infancy, citing the popular Freudian/Oedipal constructs of the day. He admitted that transsexual women could not be changed to identify as male once they reached adulthood, but he recommended that doctors should try to diagnose children before adolescence so their transsexualism could be 'treated and reversed' (Stoller, 1968). Stoller makes it quite clear that transsexual people were still very much pathologized by the medical professions at this time.

Another advance in terminology came in the introduction of the word 'transgenderism' by psychiatrist John F. Oliven. In the 1965 *Sexual Hygiene and Pathology*, Oliven defines 'transgenderism' as something found in people who have a strong urge to change their sex (Olivan, 1965). The coining of this term kick started a decades-long debate of how to define various expressions within the transgender

community, including how to distinguish those who medically/hormonally change their bodies from those who do not.

In the same decade, the dynamic conversation about gender moved from clinics and labs out into the streets in bold new ways. Racial tensions came to a head during the 60s and the (largely white) second wave feminist movement took root and faced criticism from black and Chicana feminists who were also working toward more equality and less discrimination for women, but were doing so across intersections of race and class. It was during this time that groups of gay men, transgender women, and drag queens made history for pushing back against the years of state-sanctioned police brutality they were facing on a regular basis. In 1969, their protests finally came to a head in the historic riots at Compton's Cafeteria and the Stonewall Inn. These political protests, initiated by drag queens and transgender women of color, drove gay activists to organize on a national scale and began a new era of visibility for gay and transgender people asserting their right to dignity and life (Erickson-Schroth, 2014; Stryker, 2008).

Speaking of visibility, it must be noted that this was still a time where the most visible and organized of LGBTQ people in the U.S. were white cisgender gay men, white cisgender lesbians, and white transgender women (usually in that order). Transgender studies scholar Susan Stryker perfectly explains the reason for this:

It is often the most privileged elements of a population affected by a particular civil injustice or social oppression who have the opportunity to organize first. In organizing around the one thing that interferes with or complicates their privilege, their organizations tend to reproduce that very privilege (Stryker, 2008, p. 55).

We still see much of these dynamics today in the national structure of LGBTQ rights organizations. Their funding streams, leadership structures, and legal agendas often serve the interests of the most privileged among us first, and the needs of those who are most marginalized are met only if and when it is convenient for those at the top.

1970s: The Social Construction of Gender

By the 1970s, the academic and medical study of transgender people was becoming more and more common. Transgender Americans were beginning to share their stories through memoirs and autobiographies - Jan Morris, Canary Conn, and Mario Martino penned some of the most well known examples (Erickson-Schroth, 2014). This gave the American public it's first chance to learn about transgender identity through the stories of transgender people themselves. It gave the transgender authors a way to express their own views of gender's oppressive forces, and to portray their lives as multi-dimensional, relatable, and healthy.

Because of medical advances and increased access, post-op transsexual people were beginning to be recognized legally and socially as the gender that matched their identity, and trans woman Renee Richards' entry into the women's U.S. Open was a landmark example. This was also a decade packed with political actions for women's rights in the form of national marches, court decisions like Roe v. Wade and Title IX, and the formation of groups like the National Black Feminist Organization and the National Women's Studies Association (Beemyn, 2014; Stryker, 2008).

Academics were beginning to frame gender as a social construct at this time. In *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex*, Gayle Rubin points to the 'sex/gender system' (which is responsible for prescribing different roles to males and

females and turning them into ‘men’ and ‘women’) as the reason that women are oppressed in society. This is important because she is not blaming women’s oppression on biological differences between males and females, but rather on the socially imposed norms based on those perceived differences (Rubin, 1975). Conceptualizing norms about sex as something *separate* from sex - that is, gender - was still a new idea and it opened up endless possibilities for feminist scholars in the years to come.

In *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*, Kessler & McKenna argued that the very first assumption we make about a person is whether they are male or female, but that this attribution is based on a false dichotomy of two stable categories. They go on to argue that there is no one characteristic or behavior that we can always attribute to just one sex without exception and that one’s gender identity is separate from the gender others attribute to them based on their biological sex. Because of this, they make the claim that the gender we attribute to others is always based on social categorizations and norms, and is never enough on its own to determine someone’s gender identity (Kessler & McKenna, 1978).

1980s: Conflict From Within the Cause

Given the growing understanding of gender identity and visibility of transgender people, it seems almost surprising that it was not until 1980 that transgender people were first recognized in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). In the DSM’s third edition, a ‘Gender Identity Disorder’ was listed as “an incongruence between anatomic sex and gender identity” characterized by a “sense of discomfort and inappropriateness about one’s anatomical sex” and a “wish to be rid of one’s own genitals and to live as a member of the other sex”

(American Psychiatric Association, 1980, p. 261-264). These narrow diagnostic requirements reflect the limited understanding of transgender identity people had at this time. Transgender people today show a vast diversity of relationships to their bodies and are not nearly as pathologized by most medical associations as when the DSM named ‘gender identity *disorder*’ for the first time.

1987 is considered by many to be the birth year of the field of transgender studies, largely because of a transgender woman named Sandy Stone. In that year, Stone wrote an essay called *The Empire Strikes Back: A Post-Transsexual Manifesto* in response to Janice Raymond’s 1979 book *The Transsexual Empire*. In her book, Raymond blames transgender women for ‘raping’ and ‘appropriating’ women’s bodies, reinforcing gender stereotypes that harm women, and invading/colonizing women’s safe spaces (Erickson-Schroth, 2014). Sadly these opinions of transgender women were not at all uncommon - especially in lesbian and feminist circles.

Stone, a white lesbian feminist transgender woman, responded to this attack on her identity by arguing that the reason some transgender women are adhering to ultra-feminine stereotypes is not because they are appropriating or ‘dressing up’ but because they are still beholden to the medical diagnostic criteria (largely based on performance of expected gender roles) that will get them the treatment they need. She also points out that the biggest issue in the debate about transgender people is the absence of *their* voices in any conversation and she attributes this silencing to the social pressure transgender people face to blend in with cisgender society and to pass 100 percent as their true/internally felt gender after coming out. Stone claims that the only solution to this

erasure is for transgender people to come out and be visible, especially after they transition and pass (Stryker, 2008).

Stone's call to action may be representing some of that aforementioned privilege within LGBTQ identity. To ask transgender people to come out as openly transgender after they have transitioned is to assume both that they pass/are not getting 'clocked' (and therefore need to disclose their transgender identity), and that they are in a safe economic/social position to face potential consequences of speaking openly about their transgender identity. That said, Stone's defense of transgender women is an important critique of the all too real policing that happens within the LGBTQ community and the normalizing lies transgender people have to tell to this day just to gain access to transition-related medical care.

1990s: Breaking Down Gender

The 90s saw the emergence of queer studies and trans scholarship. Judith Butler introduced her groundbreaking theory of Gender Performativity in *Gender Trouble*, where she argues that defining 'woman' as a category assumes a universal subjectivity that is really only true for the women of privileged, white, patriarchal influence. Butler takes the idea of Rubin's sex/gender system a step further by arguing that sex cannot be signified without imposing our social system of gender, and therefore both gender *and* sex are socially constructed categories (Butler, 1990). This brings a new layer of nuance to idea that gender is the socially constructed sibling of sex because we cannot know one without the other, even as we try to prove their distinction. The question 'what is a woman?' is one still asked by gender studies and feminist scholars today.

Definitions of transgender also broadened during this time when Holly Boswell re-defined 'Transgender' as including "all individuals whose gender identity or expression differed from the gender assigned to them at birth" (Erickson-Schroth, 2014, p. 523) - this ultimately helped to inform our current definitions of transgender (which may be narrower than Boswell's depending on who you ask). In 1994 Kate Bornstein published her book *Gender Outlaw*, which pushed the boundaries of definition even further by calling for a breakdown of the binary system of gender altogether - even with regards to transgender people. Bornstein is a trans scholar who was born male, transitioned and presents in a feminine way, but does not call herself a woman and instead identifies herself as a 'gender-nonconforming' person. She writes:

There's a simple way to look at gender: Once upon a time, someone drew a line in the sand of culture and proclaimed with great self-importance, 'On this side, you are a man; on the other side, you are a woman.' It's time for the winds of change to blow that line away (Bornstein, 1994, p. 21).

This is significant because the transgender cultural narrative at this point in the U.S. was still operating very comfortably within a binary of male and female. Transgender people were for the most part understood as having a mismatch between their sex-at-birth and their gender identity, and they were allowed to perform their gender or medically change their bodies to align the two (assuming they were privileged enough). But the movement they made would only be deemed acceptable if they went from one side of the 'line in the sand' to the other, and did so in a fairly normative way. Bornstein's argument was a precursor to our currently emerging views of gender identity. We know now that biological sex does not exist as a binary, and intersex people (to

provide one obvious example) show us just how broad a spectrum of bodies humans are born with. So, if sex exists on a spectrum and the binary of male and female is false, why would we limit gender (which has so long been our social codification of biological sex) to the same false binary of man/trans-man and woman/trans-woman?

2000s to Today: Where Are We Now?

The turn of the century has led us into nearly two decades of a culture that is actively wrestling with what it means to be transgender, what makes a woman or a man, how gender relates to sexual orientation and birth-assigned sex, and what transgender people's medical and legal rights should be. These questions are no doubt influenced by the postmodern era, the emergence of the Internet and social media as near-necessities in most Americans' daily lives, and the shifting racial composition of the country.

This new era has produced more visibility for transgender people, including famous athletes and celebrities coming out as trans, and a magnification of transgender voices in public and political discourse. Barack Obama became the first president ever to say the word 'transgender' in a national address and to appoint transgender white house staff members. The DSM's fifth edition changed the pathologizing term 'Gender Identity Disorder' to 'Gender Dysphoria' and redefined 'Gender Identity' as "a category of social identity (that) refers to an individual's identification as male, female, or, occasionally, *some category other than male or female*" (emphasis added) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 541). National Geographic Magazine published an entire issue about gender diversity and asked questions about how we define gender in today's world. American television shows and films now feature more transgender characters and actors (and who represent fewer harmful/totalizing stereotypes) than ever before.

We have also seen a recent explosion of new terms to describe different sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. These span from academic-sounding labels like ‘scoliosesexual’ and ‘nuetrois’, to more playful labels like ‘genderfuck’ and ‘hetero-flexible’. Facebook even gives users over 40 different gender labels to choose from on their profiles, and allows them to choose between ‘he’, ‘she’, or neutral ‘they’ pronouns. Some may feel that these new terms are further bifurcating a culture already known for being acutely paranoid about identity politics and political correctness. However these terms can also be seen as indicators of the continued personal exploration and evolution of a nation that is doing what it has always done - adapting our language and norms to fit more people’s diverse experiences into our national schema.

Beyond the Binary

There are a few different ways things could go from here. The ever-expanding list of identity labels that young people are embracing could cause serious pushback from older generations and lead them to grasp even more tightly to the idea that a person’s sex is immutable and binary and dictates their gender (if gender is even distinguished from sex at all). Another scenario could lead to a new generation of youth who grow up asking each new acquaintance they meet to share their gender identity and pronouns and then address them accordingly. Or maybe a ‘third gender’ category will emerge so that those who do not neatly fit into the boxes of male or female will be legally and socially relegated to yet another box - with some label we have not invented yet. Likely we will see some form of each of these scenarios in the decades to come.

No matter what the near future holds, we can be certain that the binary system of gender and the notion that biological sex determines one’s place in that system are two

ideas that will be placed under constant strain in contemporary U.S. discourse, likely until they break altogether. In a telling poll conducted by Fusion on 1,000 U.S. millennials (the generation of current 18-34 year olds) in 2015, 50 percent of the respondents said that they believe gender exists on a *spectrum* beyond simply male or female (LoGiurato, 2015). These numbers will likely grow with every generation.

The past century of development for the transgender community has been marked by slow and steady legal and medical inclusion that acts as a powerful normalizing force for those who experience gender outside of our norms. After Donald Trump's election as president, 2017 saw a regression for the transgender community's rights when Trump repealed federal guidance protecting transgender students and tried to ban transgender people from serving in the U.S. military (Spivak, 2017). In the first six months of 2017, over 100 pieces of anti-LGBT legislation were introduced across 29 U.S. states with the explicit goal of restricting gay and transgender Americans' right to access public life (Miller, 2017). These legislative actions reflect the fear that many U.S. Americans still have about transgender identity and what it indicates about the evolution of our nation's social norms.

For non-binary/genderqueer people, there is still very little legal recognition, partly because most states require a doctor's diagnosis for access to hormones, name changes, and updated identification. And even if someone attains these they are forced to identify as male or female under the law in all but one U.S. state. A 2016 Oregon circuit court case ruled that Jamie Shupe, a non-binary Oregonian, could legally change their sex to 'non-binary' (Foden-Vencil, 2016). At this stage in our national imagination's growth, transgender people are recognized and understood more broadly than ever, but gender has

not yet been socially accepted in more than two categories (man/transman and woman/transwoman).

In the preceding pages, I've taken a look at how some of the basic concepts of gender and sex have been shaped and changed throughout the last century of U.S. history. I've even made some preliminary guesses about what could happen next. This information should act as the context for my greater project. I hope to better understand how non-binary identified people in the U.S. (specifically in Arizona) experience, conceptualize, and describe their gender. Transgender men and women were talked about and researched decades before they were ever really heard in their *own* voices, I hope to give a voice to my community in these early stages of what will very soon be a national conversation about non-binary people's validity and right to exist. I am hopeful that a few brave and intrepid thinkers, like some of the people mentioned in the previous pages, will work to expand our understanding of the social norms that govern all of our behaviors and how they affect some of us more seriously than others.

A Way Forward

The through line of every lasting and justice-oriented change toward transgender rights has been the presence of trans voices in the conversation. Doctors did not see sex change as viable until trans patients found ways to demand what they knew would be lifesaving procedures. Transgender people throughout the decades have told our stories, found love, fought for our rights, and led our communities, actively disproving the stereotypes that labeled us as isolated or sick. We have constantly and patiently educated a public that is too often more interested in voyeurism than any real understanding. We have fought to push out the walls of the holding cell each of us was born into so that the

next person to find themselves there will not feel so constrained. Until very recently, the only way for a transgender person to be validated in their feelings was to meet or hear the story of another transgender person. We were forced to feel like the only one until we met someone whose story reflected our own - if we were so lucky.

Today, children can Google search or stumble upon what it means to be transgender, but the information they find may be wrought with stereotypes, hateful judgments, and metanarratives about how to be the *right kind* of trans person. By sharing the experiences some non-binary trans people have with gender, I hope to bring new perspectives and nuance to the growing discourse about trans identity so that we can assert our own voices and agency from the beginning of the public debate over our right to exist.

CHAPTER 3

REVIEW OF RELEVANT STUDIES

Studies on Non-Binary Gender Identity

In their 2015 review of academic studies on non-binary gender identity, Richards, et.al. came to the conclusion that “peer reviewed literature on genderqueer and non-binary identities is evidently extremely rare” (p. 98), especially in the literature from medical and psychiatric fields. The authors did however find evidence of various strategies of expressing gender identity that were employed by non-binary and genderqueer people. For example, several studies mentioned that non-binary people sometimes make their gender identities more visible by expressing gender in a way that is not expected (given how most people would read their sex), or by strategically mixing traditionally masculine and feminine elements of gender expression (Richards et. al., 2015; Engel 2002; Monro, 2010). This is significant because it may indicate that it is important to the non-binary people in these studies to find ways to present/express their gender identity to the outside world.

Richards, et. al. ultimately found that “there is no evidence to suggest that non-binary genders are pathological” (p.99), and that “exposure to gender role stereotypes diminishes confidence and interest in ‘the other gender’s fields’ (...) as well as actual performance in them” (p. 99). They recommend that mental health professionals aid their patients in exploring gender and discourage totalizing gendered stereotypes that may limit the possibilities for the patient to self-actualize their identity. Finally, they endorse the benefits of psycho-social transitions (much like those made by transgender women

and transgender men) from male to non-binary or from female to non-binary, while acknowledging that these transitions sometimes do not involve any type of surgical/hormonal/physical changes (Richards, et. al., 2015). While this study was centered on promoting healthy exploration of gender identity, it was conducted for an audience of mental health professionals and did not prominently feature the voices of transgender people.

A 2017 study by a Canadian medical research team (Frohard-Dourlent, et. al.), came about because of an onslaught of requests by transgender youth to add more options (than simply 'male' or 'female') to a national survey of student wellness the team was conducting. The team realized their own gaps in understanding the youth they set out to survey, and this realization led them to study non-binary transgender youth in Canada. In their definition, non-binary is more of a descriptive term than an identity label, and it is used as an umbrella for more specific non-binary gender identity labels. The researchers make an important note about non-binary as a descriptive term: "some people dislike that it is a term defined by its contrary. While this is a valid criticism, we find the term non-binary helpful in illuminating the dominant view of man/boy and woman/girl as both comprehensive and mutually exclusive categories" (Frohard-Dourlent, p. 2, 2017).

They found that there was a rich recent history of medical and psychological studies of transgender people, but that most of them assumed a familiar model of binary transition. "These narratives favor normative embodiments and smooth over the multiplicity of trans experiences, thus integrating trans identities into the gender/sex system. They make little room for trans people who experience their gender as non-binary or transition in a non-linear fashion" (Frohard-Dourlent, p. 3, 2017). Ultimately,

they conclude that health care providers and researchers have an ethical responsibility to account for non-binary transgender people. Since qualitative methods have been more prominent in the study of non-binary identity, they urge researchers to find nuanced ways to account for non-binary gender in quantitative methods, as population data can be lifesaving for marginalized groups (Frohard-Dourlent, 2017).

In her doctoral dissertation in clinical psychology, Ellen Boddington conducted semi-structured interviews of six non-binary identified transgender youth living in the UK, and analyzed them using thematic analysis. She found two primary themes that emerged from the data: A.) “Discovering, describing, and understanding non-binary genders” (with subthemes about self-exploration, community support, and physical health), and B.) “Non-binary genders in society” (with subthemes about stigma, activism, and social constructions of gender) (Boddington, p. 34, 2016).

Much like phenomenological analysis, the thematic analysis featured significant excerpts from each theme that exemplified the participants’ meanings. Boddington found that the bodily health of non-binary youth very much correlated with their level support from friends, family, or community, and that the youth interviewed were keenly aware of societal stigmas against their identity. In conclusion, Boddington calls for broader community education about non-binary gender identity. While this study was very similar to a phenomenological analysis, the research questions outlined by Boddington were focused on what the participants ‘say’ and ‘describe’, as opposed to what they experience and the meanings that may fall beneath or between their words (Boddington, 2016).

In 2012 and 2013, Sweden began to introduce a gender neutral pronoun ‘hen’ (the Swedish equivalent to our singular ‘they’) in addition to their masculine ‘han’ and

feminine ‘hon’. This sparked a public debate about why a new pronoun was necessary and who might be requesting others to use it, and it put Swedish people who fell outside of “tvåkönsnormen” (normative binary gender categories) into the center of public debate (Pless, 2015). This was the context for a 2015 Swedish study focusing on the experience of people with non-binary gender identity. Anna Pless’s doctoral dissertation was primarily concerned with how words or labels impacted participant’s relationship to others and to their own identities. Based in queer theory and Judith Butler’s gender performativity, this study shed light on the experience of choosing a label or identifier for oneself and how one’s expectations of how the label may be received by their community affect this choice. For example, some participants identified themselves as ‘intergender’, meaning they can switch between masculine and feminine gender expression and between identifying as man, woman, and neither/a mix. The term is similar to the English terms genderfluid and genderqueer (Pless, 2015). The study examined the direct felt experience of participants, but only as it was revealed through the meanings they placed on words. Because of this lens, any meanings that were non-verbal or not directly associated with identity labels may have been lost in this data set.

Phenomenological Studies About Transgender Identity

A few studies have focused even more specifically on examining gender identity through a phenomenological lens. In her analysis of phenomenology as a method for studying gender identity, Finnish scholar Johanna Oksala comes to the conclusion that traditional methods of phenomenological study cannot be applied to the study of gender without some modification. She sees the feminist study of gender and the traditional phenomenological method of transcendental reduction to be incompatible because “to

start the analysis from a woman's experience when trying to understand what a woman is means already assuming that which we seek to explain" (Oksala, 2006, p. 237). Oksala proposes a post-phenomenological reading which takes into account the circular nature of bracketing our own ontological assumptions while simultaneously examining them in order to understand how they inform our bracketed analysis. She argues for moving away from such a heavy reliance on the first-person perspective of the researcher and placing a higher importance on the study of the social structures that have built up that perspective (Oksala, 2006). Most of the problems she outlines can be remedied by the added context that comes from hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, as discussed further in chapter 4. Henry Rubin's (1998) *Phenomenology as Method in Trans Studies*, also examines how the topic of gender and the method of phenomenology may fit together, but he focuses specifically on the topic of transgender identity. Rubin argues that phenomenology offers a beneficial framework for studying transgender identity because of its focus on subjects' lived experience and bodily knowledge.

While Oksala and Rubin's works focus more on methodological analysis, one study by Barb J. Burdge (2013) focuses specifically on the phenomenological analysis of transgender subjects. The object of Burdge's phenomenological analysis was "transgenderism as a valued life experience" (Burdge, 2013, p. vi) and she used hermeneutic phenomenology as the method for analysis. The essential pattern found in this study of 15 transgender people was 'intimate connection'. The essential themes found were A.) Intimate connection with self (with subthemes of being true, being a unique whole, and being strong), B.) Intimate connection with others (with subthemes of being free, being open to others, being socially competent, being helpful to others, and

being in stronger relationships), and C.) Intimate connection with a larger purpose (with subthemes of being spiritually enriched and being part of social change) (Burdge, 2013).

Burdge's study may be the most similar study to this one that I could find, but the largest differences lie in the object of analysis and the sample demographic. The object of analysis in this study, 'transgenderism as a valued life experience', already puts a constraint on the participants' description of their experience of gender identity. In asking participants to describe their experience of valuing transgender identity, they may feel that they cannot or should not talk about any part of their experience of gender that is not positively valued. Burdge even mentions that one participant did not originally think that they could participate in the study because they did not immediately categorize their transgender identity as a positive experience (Burdge, 2013).

The sample for Burdge's study also sets it apart from this one in that, of her study's 15 participants, only three identified as a non-binary gender (one as genderfluid, one as genderqueer, and one as bi-gender). The rest identified as male-to-female or female-to-male transgender people and/or as cross dressers. So while there are some non-binary voices present in this study, they have been identified on the basis of speaking only to their experience of valuing their transgender identity.

In Gayle Salamon's (2010) book *Assuming a Body*, she argues, like Henry Rubin, that phenomenological analysis can be a useful method for the study of transgender experience. Salamon's reading, intertwined with queer theory and feminist epistemology, sets clear distinctions between a person's gender identity and their sexual orientation, but puts the two into conversation throughout her discussion because, she argues, they are so co-constitutive. However, the discussion throughout her book tends to be more focused

on sexual expression and romantic/bodily desire than one's own relationship to their gender identity, even considering that the two can be difficult to neatly separate. Salamon points out the important conflict that has emerged in the paradox of feminism's claim that gender is socially constructed and transgender peoples' claim that gender, via body dysphoria, can be internally and personally felt through one's body alone. The roles that one's body, social environment, and identity play in determining their experience of gender have been a point of contention between and among transgender studies and feminist scholars for years (Salamon, 2010).

Salamon's discussion reflects a larger debate that will grow in years to come as the categories of sex and gender continue to be stretched to their breaking point. If gender categories as we have known them are based on one's sex, then how do non-binary gender identities (in their infinite number) relate to a sexed body and how does one's sexed body influence their discovery of a non-binary gender identity? How will feminism have to change to recognize that the injustices people face on the basis of sex and gender exist within a hierarchy that moves far beyond simply male and female?

Significance of the Phenomenological Study of Non-Binary Identity

These studies, and the discussions and questions that come from them, are important to consider when asking transgender people to share their experience of gender identity. Phenomenology asks us to value and examine knowledge as it presents itself through our reflections on our direct experience, and this requires a delicate balance between one's emotions, psychological attitudes, bodily feelings, sexual desires, subconscious/innate knowledge, and so much more. While many scholars have identified that phenomenological methods and transgender studies have great potential to inform

each other, and while some scholars have even used phenomenological methods to study the experience of transgender people, no study has been conducted to explore the phenomenon of non-binary gender identity through the analysis of non-binary people's own descriptions.

This study seeks to work through some of the challenges that exist between feminist social constructions of gender and the transgender community's necessary knowledge of gender as situated in the body *and* society, between phenomenology's search for existential essence and the transgender community's movement away from essential identity categories. Lastly, this study was designed with the goal of giving agency and direct authorship to non-binary transgender people, as part of a scholarly effort to balance centuries of research during which many cisgender authors wrote about and for the transgender community through the lens of a binary construction of gender.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

Choosing Phenomenology

The research question for this study is: *What are the lived experiences of Arizonans who identify their gender identities as ‘non-binary’?* (‘non-binary’ defined here as anyone who identifies their gender as something other than ‘always and exclusively male or always and exclusively female’). In seeking to answer this question, I will conduct semi-structured phenomenological interviews with non-binary transgender Arizonans to record and analyze their self-descriptions of their experience with gender. This means I must practice a feminist mode of “deep listening that takes tremendous effort and requires a willingness to be altered by the words spoken” (Keating, 2009, p. 92), as well as a feminist orientation toward self-reflexivity from my position as a non-binary researcher.

I first encountered phenomenology when reading about various qualitative methods in the eighth chapter of *The Essential Guide to Doing your Research Project* (O’Leary, 2014). This guide described phenomenology as the study of the lived experience of an object, rather than the object itself (the word *object* is used here in the more abstract form, as in ‘object of study’), based on the epistemological claim that “in a socially constructed world, our direct awareness is the only thing we can really know, since all knowing depends on individual perceptions” (p. 138). Upon further reading I found intersections between phenomenology and transgender studies, as discussed in chapter 3, and this in turn shaped my epistemology as a feminist trans researcher.

Phenomenology has become a useful tool for trans studies scholars because of its emphasis on lived/felt reality over biology/morphology and because of its focus on experiential over discursive categorizations of identity. Henry Rubin made the first clear case for pairing phenomenology and trans studies in 1998. His goal was to get “out of some sticky impasses in feminist and queer studies where the brazen critiques or appropriations of transsexual practices are a result of the rejection of transsexual subjectivity as a source of legitimate knowledge” (p. 268).

While I cannot dispute that trans subjectivity has been undervalued or flat-out ignored in much of the lifespan of feminist research, it is also true that feminist practice cannot be separated from the work of trans studies and can inform the methodology for this project in positive ways. I must recognize the simultaneous truths that feminism has both failed the transgender community in many ways and has constantly been shaped by trans voices to keep pace with public discourse (of which trans people are a large focus today). It is for these reasons that I will rely on some of the tenets of feminist research to guide my phenomenological project.

Feminist Epistemology

Feminisms share with trans studies the primary goal of placing “gender as the categorical center of inquiry and research” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 2). While the traditional goal of feminist knowledge production was to center the voices and experiences of (cisgender) *women*, most feminisms are evolving to take on the project of privileging the voices of *all* those who are oppressed by our patriarchal and hegemonic gender system (a category which unarguably includes transgender people). In particular, Sandra Harding’s ‘standpoint epistemology’ seeks to do just that. Harding argues that the

voices of marginalized groups should be the starting point to knowledge production because they do not take for granted the shared assumptions of dominant culture. According to Harding, the perspectives of those who the dominant ideology has failed will prompt more objective and critical analyses of our social 'truth' (Alcoff & Potter).

Within the constructs of feminist theory, I take an expressedly postmodern stance. Postmodern feminism "argues against binarisms as the primary organizing structure of society" (Davis & Craven, 2016, p. 26) and aims to produce new ways to think beyond these constructs through analysis of social categories. Given that the focus of this project is to uncover and elevate the lived experiences of those who identify their gender as outside of our dominant binary construct of male/man and female/woman, postmodern feminism's frame of rejecting ideological binaries is a practical necessity for this work.

Phenomenology as Method

Phenomenology is rooted in the existential and hermeneutic philosophies of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir, among others (Heinamaa, 2003). As a method, Phenomenology has taken many forms across disciplines and scholars, but is most often based on the viewpoint that the natural world is only as real to us as our conscious experience of it. Phenomenological research works from the assumption that we can only discover the truth and meaning of an experience by reflecting on it through a systematic process that seeks to suspend judgment and the researcher's positional bias. Early philosophers of phenomenology believed that we cannot know reality in any direct way because the only way we can understand our world is through our mind's perception and memory of it,

which is always somehow affected by our real time corrections/theorizations/
rationalizations of these memories (Heinamaa, 2003; Sokolowski, 2008).

Robert Sokolowski describes the unique problem of phenomenological analysis in
this way:

“Since we live in the paradoxical condition of both having the world and yet
being part of it, we know that when we die the world will go on, since we are only
a part of the world, but in another sense the world that is there for me, behind all
the things I know, will be extinguished when I am no longer part of it
(Sokolowski, 2008, p. 48).

It is this paradox, of knowing that there is a world beyond our direct perception but only
being able to interact with that world *through* our direct perception, that characterizes the
challenge inherent in phenomenological study.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology in particular attends to this challenge (Burdge,
2013). How do we get to the core nature of one’s experience of a phenomenon while
recognizing that any attempt to do so is always filtered through all of our automatic
responses and predisposed attitudes to that phenomenon? The goal of hermeneutic
phenomenology “is to open up possible new understandings of the investigated
phenomenon through tactful, thoughtful engagement with the phenomenon itself”
(Burdge, 2013, p. 84). One way that phenomenological researchers try to achieve this
goal is through deep self reflection of one’s own understanding of the phenomenon.

By looking to the direct experience one has of their gender, a person’s own
account gives them epistemic agency. By valuing the authority of each participant’s

subjective accounts I am promoting a feminist and emancipatory form of knowledge production in which the subject is the author of their own truth.

Feminist Phenomenology as Method

The methods used to answer my research question are based on the methodologies of phenomenologists and feminists. Feminist social science research often prioritizes qualitative data collection paired with intersectional analysis. Since traditional quantitative research methods are bound to the false claim that one can achieve objectivity, and since postmodern feminists tend not to claim any knowledge as objectively true, I find postmodern feminist goals to align best with qualitative data methods. Feminist phenomenology seeks to gain insight from the explicitly subjective experience of marginalized voices, with the overall project of using these descriptions to enact social awareness and change. Gayle Salamon claims that phenomenology helps us to “reinterrogate that which we think we know about gender and thus to radically open up the traditional categories through which it is understood” (2014, p. 153). Salamon also notes that phenomenology allows us to know the body “by *what (we) feel*, not simply *what others see*” (p. 154), in this way deeply engaging the subjective and reflexive. This distinction between what we feel and what others see is one that transgender people are acutely aware of and spend a great deal of time reflecting on and/or compensating for.

Additionally, this methodology aligns with the feminist practice of doing research *with* (rather than *on*) a community. Phenomenology ensures that subjectivity is accounted for and that participants are co-producers of knowledge. The focus here is on analyzing the participant’s lived experience of the phenomenon in their own words and meanings

through reflexive dialogue that includes an honest recognition of the interviewer's (my) own understanding of the experiences discussed. This critical reflexivity on the part of the researcher is key to phenomenological projects. As a self-identified non-binary trans person, I have gained a personal perspective of how transgender people (especially those who are feminine, non-binary, not white, poor, undocumented, or disabled) are constantly marginalized and discredited within and beyond academic spaces. Through this project, I hope to disrupt this silencing by gathering qualitative data that lifts up the standpoint of non-binary trans people, and by paying close attention to how my analysis of this qualitative data can further enhance their agency and power, while recognizing my own privilege, motives, and biases as the researcher.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Sample

This study consisted of semi-structured phenomenological interviews with people living in Arizona who self-identify their gender as neither ‘always and exclusively male’ nor ‘always and exclusively female’. I used the term *non-binary* in the title of this study and in recruitment materials, and all five participants listed this term as one they use to describe their gender identity. This was a small sample because of the nature of phenomenological research and because the identified target population is already very small. One fairly helpful estimate of the population size comes from the 2015 U.S. Trans Survey (the largest survey of transgender Americans to date), which found that over one third of the survey’s 27,715 respondents self-identified as “non-binary or genderqueer” (James, et. al., 2016). The most recently published population estimate of transgender people in Arizona is 30,550 people (Flores, et. al., 2016). If 30 percent of that number were also non-binary, we would be looking at around 9,100 non-binary Arizonans - just 0.1 percent of the state’s total population.

Due to time and travel constraints, I scheduled in-person interviews with four non-binary identified people living in Arizona. It was difficult to find and contact people who openly identify as non-binary and who were willing to talk about their gender in a research setting. I made public calls for participants on social media groups exclusively for non-binary people. Therefore, I cannot ensure that this sample is representative of all non-binary Arizonans but as stated above this is not my goal. Rather I hope that it will

give insight into the ways that *some* non-binary trans people in the U.S. experience and describe non-binary gender identity, and how their experiences can inform our greater national construction of gender. To try and ensure more diversity in my sample, I posted the call for participants in various non-binary online groups, including those with additional criteria for membership (i.e. groups for non-binary people of color, trans-masculine or trans-feminine non-binary people, people who are non-binary & pre-op or post-op, non-binary older adults, etc.), however all four participants were between the ages of 30 and 40, and self identified as white/Caucasian.

Data Collection

The two primary methods used for data collection in this study were qualitative surveys and in-person semi-structured interviews. The two complemented each other by giving opportunities for participants to author their own categories for identification (such as race, gender, and pseudonym) and to explain in depth the meaning of these categorizations. The content of each survey and interview provided the raw data necessary for this phenomenological analysis. As stated above, the choice of using primarily qualitative data is one that aligns with feminist/phenomenological goals because it stands apart from positivist research traditions. By leaving survey and interview questions open-ended, there were no additional constraints put on the participant by the structure of the questions (see survey and interview questions in Appendix).

Preliminary Surveys

In order to get some basic data that can be compared across the entire sample, each participant took a survey online before conducting their interviews. This allowed me

to begin the data collection with a good idea of the participant's self-described demographic information and told me how they identify or do not identify with various gender identity labels. The surveys were administered through a password-protected account.

The surveys were administered only after each participant had signed an informed consent statement that told participants the following: (1) the survey will be kept online through a password-protected account until all participants have filled out the survey. After all participants have completed the survey, I will print the results to be stored in a locked cabinet throughout the remainder of the project and I will delete the online survey. (2) I will dis-identify their information by asking them to provide a pseudonym (and pronouns) of their choice at the start of the survey that will be used for the remainder of the study (including their interviews and the final analysis/write-up). (3) I will ask them to provide an email address in the survey so that they can schedule an interview. (4) All portions of the project are optional and voluntary, as are all survey/interview questions. (5) Their 45 minute in-person interview will be video recorded to aid in final analysis (6) When the study is complete all survey responses, recordings, transcripts, and contact information will be destroyed.

Hesse-Biber's *Feminist Research Practice* states that in surveys, "participants should be able to describe their experiences as they perceive them, not through the researcher's pre-conceived notions of what their worlds are like" (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 303). Reading this spurred an unexpected turning point in my epistemic process as I realized that the survey questions I had originally drafted for participants had a multiple choice format and asks some questions that only served my own agenda and curiosity as

a trans-masculine, non-binary identified person. I was not stepping back to analyze my subconscious ideas about what it means to make my community visible, and I had to reexamine my privileged position as the survey administrator before diving back into the project.

One article that gave me additional clarity during this moment was *Boxes of Our Own Creation* by Harrison-Quintana, Grant, & Rivera (2015). Two of the article's authors were on the planning team for the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS) in 2011 - the first iteration of the 2015 U.S. Trans Survey. When deciding on the structure of the NTDS, the authors looked to Audre Lorde's distinction between labels - which "someone else imposes on us from the outside" - and identities - which "we claim for ourselves" (Harrison-Quintana, et. al., p. 166). My survey questions mirrored this sentiment by promoting self-authored identity terms wherever possible.

Upon consulting these sources, I realized that for my study, the survey would need to feature questions structured in a way that gives the participant the most freedom to answer truthfully and to self-identify; such as short answer questions and multiple choice questions with write-in options. Some of the questions were used to gather basic demographic data that became useful in describing the sample and giving context to any demographic identifiers participants brought up in their interviews (for example if they state their race or age as a factor in some description of an experience). The final list of questions included inquiries about age, race, gender identity, and sex-assigned-at-birth, and about self-identifiers like the terms they use to describe their gender and the pronoun(s) they use. I compared all survey respondents' answers to see how the sample at large represents itself. This aligns with my goal of producing a deeper understanding of

the phenomena of non-binary gender identity that participants experience in their daily lives, but is not intended to become generalizable, quantifiable, or representative data about all non-binary Arizonans - as this would be an unrealistic scope for my study.

Phenomenological Semi-Structured Interviews

As the participants completed their interviews, I wrote a much shorter description of my own experience of the phenomenon of non-binary gender identity in an effort to bring my own subjectivity into conversation with the data I gather. This gave me a sense for how I see the phenomena I am studying and informed my own relationship to the data I am analyzing by helping me to be aware of how my own knowledge affects the analysis. Researchers in phenomenology should include their own position in this way because we inevitably experience things differently from our participants. The goal here is to understand our perceptions and ‘bracket’ them (or set them aside while remaining aware of them) during the process of analyzing others’ descriptions.

If we fail to examine those differences and allow ourselves to remain taken within the comfort and security of our ideals, then we will never be able to reflect on the concrete and immediate terms and conditions that have made our experiencing possible. (Martinez, 2011, p. 124)

As was the case with the initial survey, participant interviews began with an informed consent statement explaining to participants that all questions are optional to answer, that they will be recorded, that only their chosen pseudonym and pronouns will be used, that the transcripts will be printed and stored in a locked cabinet, and that the transcripts and recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study. I also told participants that they will see the final research report (my written thesis) before I present it to my

committee and with ample time to clarify any parts of the narrative description of their interviews that might misrepresent the intent or meaning of their descriptions. I chose to conduct one 45 minute interview per participant (as opposed to multiple shorter interviews) because “once an interview is conducted, the interview experience itself will have inevitably influenced how the participant interprets (their) experience” (Burdge, 2013).

My interview structure focused on “uncovering the subjugated knowledge” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 184) behind participants’ experiences through semi-structured interview questions that minimize my control as the researcher. I asked open, phenomenological questions about each participant’s experience of their gender identity (included in the appendices). I began with the question ‘*Can you describe your gender identity?*’ followed by ‘*What makes you describe it in this way?*’ and ‘*And how did you come to identify your gender the way you do now?*’. As participants answered, I tried to elicit deeper descriptions by asking clarifying questions like ‘*Can you say more about that?*’, ‘*Can you tell me what that felt like?*’ and ‘*When you say ___ what does that mean to you?*’. My intent was to uncover (through their descriptions) the participants’ experience of coming to know themselves as non-binary and which moments in their life informed and created this knowledge. I only interjected when a clarifying question was required and asked about a new topic only when the participant had nothing else to add or had diverted from the previous topic. Otherwise I responded with non-verbal active listening to encourage deeper descriptions from the participants.

Once I completed one in-person interview with each participant, I transcribed all of the interviews, read them several times each, and coded for preliminary themes, before

writing a narrative description of each interview. These narratives were sent to the participants so they could respond to my summary of their descriptions and/or reflect on the descriptions they gave and provide any clarifications. When I sent the narrative descriptions to them, I asked “*Based on our initial interview and reading my description, is there anything you would like to change or clarify?*” and “*Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience of gender as a non-binary person?*” a question that was also asked at the end of every interview.

Phenomenological Analysis

I used the transcriptions from the interviews, my written narratives of each, and the survey answers as the raw data for analysis. With this data I began a process of phenomenological analysis consisting of description, reduction, and interpretation. The descriptive phase was outlined above and is carried out through the process of interviews and narrative descriptions. The data gathered in this phase also includes answers from the survey and this data together provided me with the descriptive content for the reduction phase to follow.

The reduction phase is for “abstracting various parts of the description(s) and seeking points of convergence and divergence” (Martinez, 2011, p. 103) while making sure to keep in mind and examine my own process of meaning making. To do this, I read all of the completed transcripts several times to familiarize myself with the content. Next, I highlighted in each interview the emphasized or recurring ideas and detailed descriptions in order to make sure that the significant moments in each participant’s account were identified. These significant excerpts in each interview became the raw data to organize into theme. These 181 excerpts were easily categorized into six *initial* themes

that came up frequently in each interview; broad themes that I determined only after reading each interview from start to finish several times. By coding each excerpt for which theme(s) it fit into, thematic similarities and differences among the participants' experiences began to emerge even more clearly. These categorizations were crucial in creating the more specific *essential* themes during the next phases of analysis. At this phase I also employed the survey data to bring detail and context into the narratives and initial themes that emerged (Martinez, 2011; Burdge, 2013).

The final phase, interpretation, consisted of examining the excerpts in each initial theme gathered from the reduction phase and considering them in relation to one another. Through putting these initial themes into conversation, and looking for patterns among them, I started to distinguish three essential themes of participants' experience of the phenomena that were supported and exemplified throughout the interviews. These 'essential themes' are not meant to be generalizable to all non-binary Arizonans, but they are meant to help explicate the meaning of participants' experiences and what they can tell us about living life with a non-binary gender identity in their time and place (Martinez, 2011). The final *essential pattern* of the participant's non-binary experience emerged through my analysis of these three essential themes and the sub-themes within them. Once I had determined this essential theme, I read every participant's significant excerpts one final time to see if they were reflected in the essential pattern, themes, subthemes, before finally presenting my written findings to each participant to make sure that my analysis reflected their words and descriptions as closely as possible.

Potential Limitations

One may argue that this study is limited in its actionability. After all, whatever I may learn from this study's sample cannot be used to generalize new knowledge about all non-binary people in the U.S. What's more, due to the sampling method and barriers of access to online social support groups for non-binary people, the participants could possibly have more similar backgrounds than they would if more random sampling techniques had been used. It should be said as well that participants who are eager to contribute may have their own agendas that influence their interviews or may have biases about how the study should present them - one of many inherent potential biases in social science research methods.

The interviews themselves had limitations too. Conducting in-person interviews on a project of (relatively) small scope means that I could only interview people who live near my university (i.e. who live in Arizona). This limited the sample but ensured more openness and trust between participants and myself due to the face-to-face interview settings.

Finally, the lack of generalizability as a goal in this study means that the results will not be able to converse as directly with other relevant research. There was no tested hypothesis/foundational theory to prove or disprove, rather the conclusions emerged once all participants had contributed to the joint knowledge-building project. Additionally, since I cannot generalize my data, the findings will be more difficult to use for the purpose of enacting policy change/direct improvements to the lives of trans people and their access to safety and health. While these limitations are real and must be addressed, I believe that we must research trans experience from all angles and from the diverse

voices of real trans people in order to achieve greater understanding of how gender shapes and dictates contemporary American lives.

CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS

Participant Narratives

Based on the information each participant offered in their survey and interview answers, I have constructed a brief narrative summary of each participant. The names of each are pseudonyms that participants were asked to create to identify themselves throughout the study. All other names and identifiers have been removed.

Agrippa:

Agrippa is a 30-year-old who uses ‘they/them’ pronouns. They are tall and thin, with glasses and shoulder-length wavy blonde hair shaved on both sides. They don’t identify as a man or a woman, they were assigned male at birth, and describe themselves as transgender, non-binary, genderfluid, gender non-conforming, and trans-femme. When I met Agrippa, they were wearing gladiator-style lace-up sandals, tight-fitting pants, a scoop-neck tank-top, a long necklace, and red painted nails. Agrippa explained that their gender identity can quickly move back and forth between the masculine and feminine ends of the gender spectrum, something that they cannot control but are very aware of. As a child, Agrippa felt a strong sense of gender variance and was disappointed when they did not grow breasts during puberty.

They recently came out on Facebook as genderfluid and non-binary and have received strong support by their friends and community. Their family is still adjusting and learning to use their gender pronouns. Agrippa is not out at work, but does not completely hide their gender expression in the office either, and has a supervisor who

supports them. Since coming out, Agrippa has felt an increased sense of ease and comfort in their body, and a growing love of fashion and feminine clothing. They have a girlfriend of about a year who is incredibly supportive, and they have seen their friendships become more genuine as they live more openly. However, Agrippa mentioned living with a constant awareness that there are many people who do not understand their gender identity, and they fear that they may face physical harm or some form of abuse when they present more openly as a genderfluid/non-binary trans person.

Alex:

Alex is a 37-year-old who uses 'she/her' pronouns. She has short red hair and fair skin. Alex was assigned female at birth, but has recently come to know her gender identity as mostly agender and genderfluid. She also describes herself as non-binary and genderqueer. When I met Alex, she was wearing jeans, a v-neck tshirt, and a cardigan. Alex comes from a conservative religious background, and remembers always feeling that something about her gender did not match what everyone expected of her. If Alex could wave a magic wand, she would express her gender in a neutral way, or be open to expressing across the spectrum, and she would even consider changing her body to some extent. While her pronouns are generally associated with women, she has used them her whole life and feels comfortable continuing to use them, as she is not confident that the people around her would ever use different pronouns if she asked.

After one of her children came out as transgender, and she began to meet more transgender people, Alex started to be more open about her gender with the people in her life. This experience has brought her much closer to her children, and she feels optimistic about the open-mindedness of younger generations. She is no longer involved in any

religious community, as she and her son did not feel welcome or supported. She feels safe at work, but the nature of her job would make it difficult for her to change her gender expression noticeably from day to day. Currently, Alex does not have a supportive environment for non-binary gender expression at home or in her community. She says that trying to reconcile how she feels with what her environment requires of her has taken a negative toll on her emotional and physical health, but that her mental health has improved as she has become sure of her identity.

Max:

Max is a 32-year-old who uses ‘they/them’ pronouns. They have multiple tattoos, short hair dyed shades of pink and purple and shaved on the sides and back, and a small septum ring. Although they feel most comfortable with a masculine gender expression, Max does not identify as male or female. They describe their gender as Non-Binary, Trans-Masculine, Genderqueer, Transgender, and FTX. When I met Max, they were wearing a v-neck t-shirt and shorts. Max has been taking testosterone for about nine months, has been binding their chest for years, and will be having ‘top surgery’ (a bilateral mastectomy) in a few months. Max is excited about getting facial hair and a deeper voice, but expressed concern about their body changing to the point where they would only be seen as male, and may stop taking testosterone if they feel they are no longer seen and treated as a genderqueer person.

Max never felt like a woman or a man, and does not believe in a binary system of gender. They came out as a lesbian at age nineteen but when they still struggled with accepting their body and expressing their gender they began to realize that they were transgender. Though transitioning has given Max a better relationship to their body, they

desire to stay strongly tied to the feminine parts of their personality, and have struggled with the emotional changes that hormone therapy has caused. They have a strong community of very supportive friends. They experienced a high level of anxiety in their previous work environment, and felt that they could not come out at work. After transferring to a new branch, Max feels safe and comfortable, and has more affirming co-workers. Max has noticed a transformation in their self-confidence and ability to advocate for themselves.

Megan:

Megan is a 34-year-old who uses ‘they/them’ and ‘she/her’ pronouns. They have short hair that is partially dyed green. Their expression changes from more masculine to more feminine depending on how they feel, but they do not believe in the gender binary and describe their gender as non-binary, agender, genderqueer, and genderfuck. When I met Megan, they wore a polo shirt, shorts, and sneakers with long socks, and had on multiple small earrings, bracelets, and necklaces. Megan has never identified as a woman, but does not feel like a man either. They recalled a feeling of betrayal when their body started to develop during puberty, and they often wear a chest-binder. They have considered getting top surgery, though they are afraid it will be unattainable because it is so expensive.

They started to actively explore their gender identity when they got divorced from their ex-husband, who came out as gay. They accidentally attended a support group for transgender women and this introduced them to their local transgender community. They are now content in knowing that they are not absolutely sure what form their gender may take in the future. Megan started to come out at work, but faced a few hurdles when their

coworkers confronted them about their pronouns. Coming out has made some of their friendships more distant, as their friends are unfamiliar with this part of Megan's identity. Megan has recently started dating a transgender woman and this has made them realize how people view trans-femininity. They worry about safety when they go out in public together, and they try to express their gender in a way that is a mix of masculine and feminine so that they can distinguish the people who will be accepting from those who may respond violently. Overall, Megan's happiness and confidence has improved since coming out and genuinely expressing their gender.

Researcher's Experience With Non-Binary Gender Identity

As a feminist researcher following phenomenological methods, I must exhibit a certain amount of reflection upon my own position with relation to the topic at hand. I am in a privileged position as a researcher because the power dynamic between me and the participants of this study is such that I have the final control over how their experiences are represented. However, as a non-binary transgender person myself, I know the vulnerability and trust inherent in sharing such deep and personal accounts, and I intend to represent these descriptions ethically and with the respect they deserve.

My experience with non-binary gender identity began as I was first exploring my own dysphoria with my body at the age of 21 (I was assigned female at birth). I have always been more comfortable in a neutral or masculine gender expression and presented that way off and on for about two decades before realizing I was transgender. When I was first exploring and finding resources online, I discovered non-binary identities and knew intuitively that I fit somewhere within this category, but I also had a deep desire to have my breasts removed and to see my body take on the masculinizing effects of testosterone

therapy. Now, a few years later, I have had a mastectomy and have a deeper voice, more muscle mass, and some facial hair as a result of hormone replacement therapy. When I first came out as transgender I told everyone I was transitioning to male and started going by ‘he/him’ pronouns. At the time, I was trying on this identity as I truly thought it was a viable option that would make me happy. As I started to pass more and was treated as a man, when people close to me began to *see* me as a man, I realized the privilege inherent in this ability to hide my transgender identity, but I also remembered my early days of exploration and identification with non-binary people. I felt deeply what I had known from the start: that I feel just as not-fully-male as I did not-fully-female when I came out. I don’t desire to live in the world with a 100 percent typically male body and to be treated, seen, and recognized as 100 percent male.

However, since I am equally comfortable using ‘he/him’ and ‘they/them’ pronouns, most of the people in my life who knew me before and during my transition from female still see me as a trans man. This does not bother me so much because my authentic gender *expression* is such that when I’m dressing and acting authentically I appear to people as a feminine man. More recently, I have reexamined what it means for me to be non-binary – something I always have been and always will be – and how this part of my identity is affected by my past presenting as a girl, then an openly lesbian woman, then a straight trans man, and now a queer, masculine-of-center, transgender, non-binary person (who still looks to most strangers like a straight cisgender man). I have had to reconcile with the fact that my non-binary identity being less visible does not make it any less true, but that it means it will not often be acknowledged outside of queer spaces. This internal recognition and affirmation of my identity as not female but not

fully male has made me happier, healthier, and more independent than I have been at any other stage of my life. I know that this comes from a combination of having a body free of dysphoria, an authentic gender expression, and a clear internal sense of my identity as a transmasculine, non-binary transgender person.

It is important to note that I also recognize my immense privilege as someone who had the time, financial security, and community support to medically (as well as socially) transition. This privilege is furthered when considering that I am white, I appear more masculine than feminine, I pass as male, and I am attracted to women (and therefore also pass as straight). It is from this position that I conducted my analysis.

Initial Reduction

The four interviews led me to 181 excerpts that pointed to instances of significance (e.g. intense emotions, turning points, realizations, deep descriptions, and reiterated points). These significant excerpts could each be categorized into at least one of six initial categories: A.) Internal Factors (i.e. one's knowledge of their gender identity or relationship to their body), B.) External Factors (i.e. one's gender expression, clothing, or gender roles), C.) Prohibitive Factors (i.e. negative or painful experiences, emotions, memories that hold back authenticity or wellness), D.) Affirming Factors (i.e. positive experiences, emotions, memories that encourage authenticity or wellness), E.) Moments of Understanding (i.e. instances that promoted one's discovery of their gender identity or sense of self), and F.) Moments of Labor (i.e. instances where effort was put into being safe, healthy, or supported in one's gender identity). The distribution of significant excerpts across theme and participant are displayed in Table 1. Most excerpts were coded for several themes. These categories organized the data in a way that made clear the

connections between each interview’s significant moments and informed the creation of the essential themes to follow.

Table 1

Distribution of Significant Excerpts Across Category and Participant

Initial Coding Category	Agrippa	Alex	Max	Megan	Percentage of All Significant Excerpts
Prohibitive Factors	13	11	13	12	27.07%
Moments of Understanding	9	6	10	9	18.78%
Moments of Labor	17	26	16	15	40.88%
Internal Factors	22	11	15	12	33.14%
External Factors	24	23	23	15	46.96%
Affirming Factors	14	13	17	12	30.93%

Essential Pattern and Themes

Throughout the interviews, as each participant described their experience of having a non-binary gender identity, their unique discussions created one essential pattern, that of Cultivating Self Realization. This leads me to conclude that for these participants the experience of non-binary gender identity is, in essence, an experience of cultivating self-realization. This through line is supported by three smaller essential themes. Throughout their descriptions, every participant outlined turning points in the development of their gender identity in three categories: 1.) Internal Recognition, 2.) External Presentation, and 3.) Movement Toward Wellness.

Eight subcategories emerged within these three themes. Internal recognition of one’s gender identity was characterized by: A.) Intuitive/Bodily Knowledge, B.)

Discovery of Possibility, and C.) Rejecting the Binary. The participants’ external presentation led to: A.) Change in Relationships, and B.) Individual Self-Policing. In their movement toward wellness, participants experienced: A.) Ability for Self-Reflection, B.) Improvement in Health, and C.) Increased Self-Reliance. A graphic representation of the essential pattern, themes, and subthemes is offered in Figure 1 below.

Essential Pattern: Cultivating Self-Realization		
Theme 1: Internal Recognition	Theme 2: External Presentation	Theme 3: Movement Toward Wellness
Sub-Themes: A.) Intuitive/Bodily Knowledge B.) Discovery of Possibility C.) Rejecting the Binary	Sub-Themes: A.) Change in Relationships B.) Individual Self-Policing	Sub-Themes: A.) Ability for Self-Reflection B.) Improvement in Health C.) Increased Self-Reliance

Figure 1. Essential meanings of the participants’ experience of the phenomenon of non-binary gender identity.

Theme 1: Internal Recognition

Participants each discussed at length the process by which they came to know their gender and describe it as they do today. This journey of discovery began with the internal recognition of how they interacted with gender. Participants described how going through puberty changed their relationships with their bodies, how family life and their childhood taught them gender roles and expectations, how meeting other transgender and queer people helped them to understand what all of these feelings meant. Finally, they described how they came to the realization that they felt somewhere in between or outside of completely male and completely female. This process of Internal Recognition was comprised of moments and feelings that fell within three subcategories: A.) Intuitive/Bodily Knowledge, B.) Discovery of Possibility, and C.) Rejecting the Binary.

The following will explore these subthemes in depth, using significant excerpts from the interview transcripts that led to the formation of each theme.

Sub-Theme A: Intuitive/Bodily Knowledge

The participants each expressed a lifelong feeling that the gender associated with the sex assigned to them at birth did not fit how they felt or who they wanted to grow up to be. However, none of them entirely desired to transition and live exclusively as what many people would consider the ‘other gender, and thus they were left with the confusion of having only two options in sight and not identifying with either one. Agrippa explains the lifelong weight of this feeling:

All my life it was a thing that I would always have at the back of my mind and reflect: ‘When are you gonna deal with this? This seems to be a thing that’s not going away’... It’s been such a constant in my life. I knew from the time I was like ten that this was a thing. But I was sort of in denial about it.

That feeling was only heightened when Agrippa reached puberty and they started to realize that their feelings were not typical to those of their peers. This was the beginning of about two decades of hiding and ignoring these feelings.

When I hit the age that I noticed that puberty was a thing, people started changing, I expected that I was gonna develop breasts and look like more of the girls that I knew. And then I found out that that wasn’t the case. And I was kind of disappointed. But I got the impression that, since it wasn’t going to happen, paying attention to it or talking about it wasn’t appropriate. So all of that thought and feeling just stayed inside and closeted.

Megan had a similar experience with puberty, however instead of finding that something was missing, they found that the breasts they were developing were foreign and undesirable. They longed to retain the neutral body they had grown used to:

Going through puberty I really felt betrayed. Just thinking about how my whole life I have to be with this now. Like, there’s no going back. If I could go back to being a preteen, and just everything being neutral, that would be fantastic. But I

could never really express that, or at least I didn't feel safe to talk about that feeling...

I would avoid wearing a bra because I was like: 'I don't even wanna admit that those are there. I just wanna hunch my shoulders and pretend that they're not there'. So looking back that makes sense, but at the moment I just thought that there was something wrong with me, and I just shouldn't talk about it.

Megan's feelings of dysphoria seemed taboo to her at the time, much like Agrippa's.

They shared a sense that whatever they were feeling was wrong; that they could not reach out for help because they believed they were alone in the feelings they could not explain.

Max echoes their confusion:

I feel like genderqueer and gender non-conforming identity has always been a part of me, since I was a child. I think I lived for a really long time not being able to describe it. Like years and years...

I have a lot of memories of being very young and wishing I was a boy, and having those sort of boy inclinations. I have this stupid memory of when I was- not stupid, but of when I was a kid trying to adjust my pants to look like I had a penis.

These instinctive physical indicators of difference left the participants feeling as though they were alone or that perhaps there was something wrong with them. However, luckily each of them grew into adulthood and began to encounter other people who felt the same.

Sub-Theme B: Discovery of Possibility

Meeting a transgender person who was living a full and healthy life was a crucial factor in the participants' self-discovery. The visibility of others before them became the validation they had been searching for to start to speak and live their truth for the first time. Alex tells the story of how she came to feel this sense of empowerment, and began to shed her feelings of guilt and confusion despite generational gaps:

I went back to school, and then I met a friend of mine who is male-to-female transgender. And she spoke to my class and I was like: 'Oh my God! This is wonderful!'

... All this started kind of coming up. And I guess I'm this small-town person raised in a very small-town way. And so I was a very old adult by the time I had the

right way to figure out what was going on. So I tried to be really excited and tell people I was close to: 'Ok guess what. I figured it out. And I'd really like to be a little bit more like what I feel like I need to be, and less of what I feel like you need me to be'. And it didn't really work for anyone but my kids. I have to tell you my kids are amazing and accepting. They're like 'Tell me what you need. Ok, we'll use that word'.

Even while many people in her life rejected her first attempt to come out to them, Alex felt the support of her friend and her children, and this alone was enough to carry her into a process of deeper self-exploration.

For Agrippa, it was the vast diversity of people online that provided that safe place and a path to discovery:

I only really started identifying as non-binary and genderfluid when I knew that there was a word for that... I thought I was the only one that had this experience. And then when I discovered the Internet and I heard the story of a genderfluid individual who was like: 'I go back and forth and sometimes I feel more femme and sometimes I feel more masc, but it's never really tied down. It could even change within a day, or within an hour'. So the more that I was exposed to other people's stories... I could reflect on my own experience, and say 'That's something similar to what I've felt or noticed in myself'.

Megan similarly stumbled upon an online representation of transgender identity through accidentally finding their way into a local transgender support group. They told me about this funny coincidence:

Oddly enough, right before the lesbian meet up they had a trans meet up. And I got the time wrong and I accidentally showed up for that one. And they were like: 'Well come on in! It's fine!' and I was like: 'But you know I'm- I don't know. I don't think I'm trans'. And it was transwomen specifically, so I really felt like I was not in the right place. But hearing their stories and everything... I was like: 'I'm an advocate for transgender people. I'm so interested in this topic. Super interested'. So whenever I get interested I just start researching things on the internet and reading and reading and becoming familiar with everything and then getting into the nitty gritty, like the kind of whispers in the background. Sort of like: 'Also non-binary people are under the trans umbrella'. It's like: 'Woah, what? And actually a lot of that sounds like me, because I'm not fitting into either identity'.

Through each participant's unique encounters with the transgender community, they began to realize not only that body dysphoria was not uncommon, but also that one does not have to transition only from male-to-female or from female-to-male. This opening of the definitions of gender helped them to see a future for themselves where they might be able to come out and transition from male or female to non-binary.

Sub-Theme C: Rejecting the Binary

A strong community of LGBT friends surrounded Max for many years before they came out as trans. They were familiar with what hormone therapy could do for a person who was born female. But when they began taking testosterone to masculinize their body, Max found themselves caught between their desire for their body to adopt some typically male features and their desire to remain visibly non-binary in a culture where visual cues and assumed gender are so automatically linked.

I kind of went on T as an experiment. And then I was like: 'Woah, yeah! This is me. This is everything I wanted'. You know? And then trying to reconcile that non-binary stuff. Because I don't feel like a man. I don't want to be a man... It's hard because I feel so excited about the changes! It's a duality in my head! Because I am excited about hair, and I'm excited about my voice changing. My voice has deepened quite a bit. Yeah I'm excited for it. So I think it's hard because I want to be visibly queer and visibly trans, and I don't want to. And I don't really have an answer... It's something I grapple with a lot. I just don't wanna pass for a cis-dude at some point. That feels scary to me. Because being visibly queer is so important to me. It's like my whole life. Well not my whole- but it's been this huge part of my identity.

Alex, on the other hand, knew that she would need to continue to present a certain way in her job, community, and home life. But even though making changes to her body was not something she could strongly consider, she still desired to be seen neither male nor female, but someone else entirely:

I think I lean towards agender. So I don't think I'm strongly in one camp... What I express might not necessarily be what I feel, I guess. Now you have me thinking. I guess I have moments of gender, and other than that I would be agender. Even though that's not what I express... (If I could) I would have more flip-flopping days, or just be more neutral all together. I just kinda want to be neutral. Can we not say I'm anything in particular?

Her frustration about feeling forced into being labeled as either a man or a woman was a sentiment expressed by every participant. Both Megan and Max specifically use the label 'non-binary' to express this very idea. Megan writes:

I feel like non-binary not only indicates to a person that I don't fit either of the binary, but they also can sometimes pick up on the fact that I don't necessarily believe that the binary exists... I'd rather be neutral. Somewhere in the middle.

Max goes a step further and explains how non-binary identity helps them to honor the more masculine and the more feminine parts of their identity simultaneously:

I'm a masculine person that doesn't subscribe to the gender binary. I just don't feel either male or female. I feel like I'm somewhere in between. But I'm decidedly more masculine than I am feminine in my presentation... Even though my body feels more in line with my mind when I'm doing these sorts of medical transition stuff like taking testosterone and getting top surgery... Although I do really feel close to the feminine aspects of my personality. Which is another part of non-binary identity for me.

The participants learned about non-binary identity in varied ways, and they are in different positions that allow some more freedom than others to medically transition or express their gender as they feel it. However, they have each come to a place where they feel deeply that they do not exist with a binary structure of male and female, and that they must be honest about that (even if only to themselves) in order to live a more full life. These early experiences and emotional journeys catalyzed their movement toward a full and authentic experience of gender identity. No matter their path to understanding their

gender, every participant has gone through life changes as they reconcile their inner sense of gender with their presence in the social world outside.

Theme 2: External Presentation

Gender expression is something that everyone has; it does not matter if you are cisgender (meaning your birth sex and gender align) or transgender. Gender expression is how a person conveys their gender to the outside worlds through social roles, clothing, mannerisms, and even subconscious visual and auditory cues. In their descriptions of non-binary gender identity, the participants dove deep into discussions of gender identity, what it means to them, and how they use it to manage the way that people respond to them in different areas of their lives. For some, expressing non-binary gender meant a big change in how they appeared. For others, it was something subtler and harder to notice. For each of the participants, this external presentation of an internally recognized gender identity manifested itself in two primary ways: A.) Change in Relationships, and B.) Individual Self-Policing.

Sub-Theme A: Change in Relationships

Although some changes were positive and others more negative, every participant discussed how their relationships to their family, co-workers, friends, and intimate partners changed as they became more aware and open about their gender identity. Some even mentioned how living into their true gender changed how they viewed others.

Alex shared how opening up to her husband about her gender identity changed their relationship. Her husband was only interested in recognizing Alex's gender in their sexual relationships, but made her feel like she needed to hide it in every other aspect of life:

I think it has changed how I feel in the bedroom. So that's huge for me. I think that's almost one of the places where I feel it the most. And, you know, that's an issue for me...

I think it's interesting because from my partner's perspective, everything goes there. It's fine. But as soon as we're out of the bedroom then: 'Oh Hell no'. We're not gonna actually live that life. That's just something we get to do sometimes'. It gets let out there, but that's it. But then that causes me to repress that more than anything else in my life. Like no, that's never gonna be let out there. That's the last place it's gonna be let out. So that's not ok.

After experiencing various levels of acceptance in past relationships, and after breaking up with one partner because she was unable to see them as non-binary, Max started to reflect on what they needed from a partner and what they brought to the relationship.

They had a realization that living more genuinely changed the way they approached new romantic relationships:

It's a huge 'duh', but you don't think about it as that; being authentic helps your self-esteem! And your understanding yourself in the world...

It's definitely shown up in my dating life and relationships. I think that I have boundaries and ideas of what I want and need, and I'm pretty good at articulating it. So that's felt really good

Agrippa's was excited to find that their community was strengthened when they came out. They were able to bring their entire personality into social interactions and were greeted with the same level of authenticity in response.

So if you talk about the interpersonal relationships and the human environment that I surround myself in, yeah. I would say that it's gotten a lot better since I've come out. Because I'm no longer questioning and editing my own actions and my own interactions, I feel like I have much more honest encounters with my friends.

Megan, on the other hand, found that as they lived into their identity their friends began to distance themselves from them in subtle ways. Megan mentioned that things will likely never be as they were before, but that they will still find social support somewhere. They

explain: “It sucks, but then again I want friends who are ok with who I am. That’s just how it is”.

Even the singular act of requesting that people use a new gender pronoun proved to cause all kinds of changes in the participants’ relationships. Agrippa and Max in particular shared that their families were trying to understand, but still struggled. Agrippa told me:

The tough thing, that my family is finally coming around on, has been pronouns. But that’s tough for a lot of people. You know?... My parents were tough at first, because it was just a very new thing. And also the degree to which I didn’t really know how to talk about it or instigate this feeling, was light years ahead of their preparation for this. Or exposure, or interest. Because for their generation that was not a thing. Their closest touchstone is Caitlyn Jenner, and that’s about the depth of their understanding of the transgender experience.

Max echoed this generational divide, although they saw yet another dynamic come into play because of their parents’ evangelical Christian background:

With my family, I’m still kind of working on it. They understand things about me, but they continue to misgender me. And I’m just giving them the time and space to do that... I come from a very conservative background. My parents are, not that much anymore, but were evangelical Christians. And my mom is very gender essentialist.

Across the board, the people who made a positive impact on the participants were those who were either already familiar with non-binary people, or who knew nothing about non-binary identity but were willing to learn and respond to the new information with open-mindedness and respect. Most of the negative experiences the participants recounted had to do with the other person’s lack of familiarity/comfort with non-binary identity and an unwillingness (either implicit or overt) to recognize it. These negative reactions, and the fear of future interactions that might look the same, caused the

participants to self-edit their behavior and expression to suit how they felt other people wanted them to be.

Sub-Theme B: Individual Self-Policing

Every participant reported multiple instances of having to change their behavior, appearance, or life decisions at some point to conform to what they thought others expected of them. Most of them experienced this in relation to their work environment.

For example, Megan struggled when attempting to come out at new job:

In my current job, they wanted us to make a bio. And we had to talk about ourselves in the third person. And I was just starting to write a rough draft and I immediately went to 'They', and froze. And just didn't work on it for two more days because I was like: 'I don't know what to do. After a few days of thinking it over, I decided I'm just gonna do it and see what happens...

The upstairs office called and she was like: 'Did you mean to say 'they'? I have questions' and then I said: 'Yes, that's actually my preferred pronoun. I understand it's a little confusing but it's how I feel'. And she said: 'Ok well, that's fine I'll leave it in'. So that was pain-free and I was so excited. But then one of the admissions people was reviewing it and double-checking it, and she just changed it to 'she' pronouns. And came and talked to me the next day after she had realized what she had done. That she had just been ignorant and made this decision without asking about it. And that was disheartening. Even though she was apologetic, and said: 'I guess we can change it back'. But I didn't want to put her out, I don't know. Like: 'Yeah it would be great if you put it back but I don't feel comfortable asking you to put it back'. So that was really disappointing. I still don't know what I'm gonna do with that or if I'll just leave it.

This story exemplifies the heavy feeling of knowing something might go wrong, expecting for people not to understand, and having to perform according to others' level of comfort/familiarity.

Max experienced a crisis when trying to conform in their work environment:

I used to have all of these rules for myself at work. Like about what I could wear and stuff... I wear a lot of bowties, like any other queer, but I used to have rules about not wearing them at work. Even though I love dressing up... I just had weird rules for myself. I don't know why. Shame does weird things to you.

Ultimately, this pressure to change caused a noticeable decline in Max's physical health, especially once their body started to change:

At my job I knew that I needed to come out. That I was on T, that I was feeling very uncomfortable to continue to be transitioning and not tell anyone. Just existing as my birth-name, and at this job. So the job itself was stressful and kind of an unhealthy environment...

I used to get these weird neck pains literally every time I would come into (work). Because I didn't know I had this stress. Right? So I'd be fine all weekend, and then I'd walk in the first day of work and I'd have weird pains because of stress.

Alex told a different story, based on her feeling that work may be a safer place for authentic expression than her home or community:

In my work environment, I feel like I could change tomorrow and change significantly and I would be ok. And there are people who wouldn't be ok with it but the people that matter, that keep me employed, would be fine with it... I work in a very accepting environment... It's more what I have to be when I leave that restricts that.

Agrippa explained that, being raised as a boy, they felt an intense social pressure to conform to masculinity and maleness before coming out: "I tried to go completely masculine and just be a dude and all that for a few months, and it wasn't satisfying. Or effective. I didn't like who I was being or the behaviors and feelings I was exhibiting". They explained how their gender identity made them acutely aware of the implicit norms we all learn as children and carry with us into adulthood. They explained: "When you enter into a situation and people perceive you as one gender or another, they're expecting you to perform in a certain way. If you don't it's weird. It turns everything on its head and it feels awkward."

Once they had a deeper internal recognition of their gender identity as non-binary, each participant faced positive and negative responses when they began to bring their understanding of gender into conversation with their social world. The people and environments around them in turn mediated their external presentation of gender, which caused changes in their relationships and controlled how and where they could fully express themselves. These experiences, though challenging and painful at times, helped each participant to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and to make decisions that will help them to move toward a life that authentically represents their gender.

Theme 3: Movement Toward Wellness

During their interviews, every participant spoke from a place of knowing confidently how they identify with gender and of trying on different ways to bring that knowledge into their external world. The participants' gendered knowledge and its expressive manifestations aided in their movement toward leading a holistically healthy life. Being well, especially for a transgender person, means knowing who you are at a basic level, and being able to express that without editing or hiding parts of yourself. Wellness is a combination of psychological, emotional, social, and physical health. The interviews revealed three elements of movement toward wellness: A.) Ability for Self-Reflection, B.) Improvement in Health, and C.) Increased Self-Reliance.

Sub-Theme A: Ability for Self-Reflection

One crucial aspect of a healthy self-image is the ability to see and accept your own position within the greater world of overlapping social identities. Every category of human identity overlaps with many other categories to create relative positions of

privilege and disadvantage. These are based on many factors including race, economic class, language, geographic location, time period, ability, and sexual orientation. While a transgender man or a transgender woman may be considered more privileged than a non-binary/genderqueer/agender/genderfluid person in terms of gender identity alone, no social identity can be viewed as a single or stand-alone vector for analysis. A deep understanding of oneself should prompt an understanding of how one's identity is situated as compared to others in the same community.

Every participant in this study was white, and while none of them explicitly stated that their race gave them privilege within the transgender community, many of them understood that their relative privilege made them feel safer and more secure than other transgender people. Alex explains her awareness of the extra labor transgender people take on, as well as her awareness of her own privilege:

Little everyday struggles that are so much harder sometimes, for myself, but also for my kid, learning about this and talking about this. Things that are irritations to people, and can frustrate them, are elevated to an extent where people become hopeless and lost and not willing to continue on in their lives. And sometimes we can find these big moments that are horrible that happened to them, but a lot of times it's just constant berating and criticism and having everyone looking at them like that. You know?...

So I think it gives me more empathy probably. I do feel it, but at the same time not at the extent of what other people are having to go through. So I am the first one to say I am very fortunate that way. I'm very fortunate.

When her children started to realize their own identities as sexual and gender minorities, Alex began to better understand how she could use her self-reflection to mentor them:

I have children now in the (LGBTQIA) community. And I think that it helps me to be even stronger in who I am. Not just try to squish who I am back into what I'm supposed to be. Because I can't do that. Because I need to support them and because I need to be a good example for them that we don't have to hide in a closet.

Agrippa also reflected on how their identity put them at risk, while simultaneously recognizing that they were in a relative position of security:

I haven't been verbally abused by anybody, I haven't been attacked by anybody or anything. But it still feels like I can feel that unsafety a little bit. When I go out to very public spaces when I'm dressed the way that I wanna be. And so I'm always kind of waiting for the other shoe to drop. And I'm not sure if or when I'm actually going to have to experience that...

I read about others' experiences, and the intense hate and judgment and aggression in a lot of cases with people, against trans people, that I've thankfully not experienced yet. Aside of just that I can feel people's eyes on me.

Megan, through their relationship with a transgender woman, began to realize their relative privilege as someone who often presents on the masculine end of the spectrum and who is able to hide their identity when they need to be safe:

I just started dating somebody who's also trans, and that's been interesting. Because people don't usually question as much someone who looks like a girl presenting more masculine. It's just like: 'Oh, a tomboy' or you know it's acceptable. But the other way around, you get stares or people mutter underneath their breath as they're passing you. And it's really frustrating, I get really defensive. You know? I care about this person. And there's people muttering and being rude...

It's made me notice how easily I can move through society versus how she does. That I don't have to worry about certain things. I wish it were different. It just makes me consider things a lot more about where is safe. Where, can we go, and what's our exit strategy? That kind of a thing.

Another aspect of self-reflection that emerged was the participants' ability to make meaning out of past experiences and connect them to their identity development. For example, Max realized how both their academic background and their relationship with to body type solidified their acceptance of their non-binary identity. They reflected:

I feel like I like went to gender studies and feminism, this is a newer realization for me, as a way to try to understand accepting myself as a woman. For a really long time. Like: 'I'm oppressed'. And I used to think that the box for women, I should be stretching that box. Instead of like: 'I just don't belong in that box'. And so I spent a really long time in my life trying and trying and trying to reconcile that. And mostly doing it, but never feeling one hundred percent...

I started to lose weight a little bit. I used to be about sixty or seventy pounds heavier than I am now. And realizing I'm still not comfortable with my body. I used to think it was a fat woman thing, and realizing it's actually not. It's a gender thing".

The participants' ability to look back and reflect on their experiences showed a certain amount of comfort in their knowledge of self. Their reflections pointed to a deeper sense of confidence and general health that came with being more true to themselves.

Sub-Theme B: Improvement in Health

During their interviews, the participants each found their own way to describe the changes that occurred when they were able to lift some of the burdens of confusion, doubt, and self-policing that they had been carrying for so long. It was clear from their accounts that they felt a distinct change in their overall health when they were able to accept themselves and be recognized and supported by others. For some, this meant an increased sense of emotional security, for others it was a noticeable decline in the physical and mental ailments that they had become accustomed to.

Agrippa discussed the physiological changes they noticed when they no longer felt pressure to conform to gender expectations and roles:

I look back at pictures of me, just a couple of years ago, and I look like a different person. And I think it has a lot to do with all of this tension that was being held in my facial muscles. So that's just opened my entire body up to a full range of expression that wasn't available to me before. That felt like it had to be kept bound inside this box...

I feel different when I'm wearing female-coded clothing. And I'll notice that there's a lot less tension in my body. Like of hips and arms and wrists and things. Places where I would normally hold tension when I was 'Playing a guy'.

Megan felt the emotional benefits of expressing their gender in ways that were more affirming, especially as they changed their interactions with other people:

I feel so much more confident. You know being brought up as a girl, oftentimes you're told: 'don't express yourself too forcefully. And don't be a bitch', basically. But now I've started coming into my own... Like over a few weeks I just started dropping my voice lower and lower. And I was really excited because I could get my voice out there much louder. And people could hear me. I didn't sound like background noise anymore. So getting that response, and noticing my own power, has been very cool. While Alex still struggles to feel completely authentic and supported, she has found an internal source of resilience and patience. With a better understanding of her gender identity, she is able to see how her relationship to her identity impacts her health:

It has helped me in a lot of struggles to see where I'm at versus other people. And to be ok with where I'm at and where I'm going. So mental health wise I think it's better. But physical health wise I think it's been more of a stress for me. But that's just because my emotions and my physical health can be tied pretty closely. Which I wish it wasn't. And I don't know maybe if things ever change then I could say that once I was able to be completely comfortable and not restrictive, than maybe that would change. I would like to think it would.

Overall, the participants discussed prohibitive/negative factors in their interviews more frequently than they did affirming/positive factors. That said, the majority of the negative factors discussed were either tied to a sense of confusion and inner struggle *before* coming out, or were focused on temporary environmental and social factors. The positive aspects discussed largely focused on moments and changes that occurred *after* the participants realized and began to express/share their gender identities. These positive factors were less likely to change, as they were rooted in the participants' movement from relying on others' expectations of them, to relying on their own internal motivations and desires.

Sub-Theme C: Increased Self-Reliance

The participants' stories and memories painted a clear picture of the pressure they felt to conform to the expectations of those around them. They described a lifelong

feeling that there was something different about them, and many reported feeling as though they could not or should not share their feelings with those around them. This shame and confusion led the participants to change their gender expression in order to appease society's explicit and implicit expectations for them. But their paths toward living authentically have been marked by a journey relying less on the pressures around them and more on their own internal compass.

Each participant discussed how they manage, in their own way, to step away from some from some of their external pressures to conform and toward their own desire to be confident in their non-binary gender identity. For Agrippa, this meant paying less regard to what others may think of them. They talked about the freeing feeling that comes with this new sense of internal confidence and truth:

I've gotten pretty good about not giving a fuck. And really just going with however I feel, devil may care. And if anybody else is gonna receive it in a certain way, I have no control over that anyway. I think that was a really liberating discovery. That the only thing that I have control over in this situation is myself and my feelings. And if I'm gonna be true to that, that's gonna feel the best for me.

For Alex, the pressures of her work and home environment still largely dictate her gender expression. She reported that it gives her strength and encouragement to find the moments when she can feel affirmed in being seen as something other than 100 percent female.

There are certain days when I've had people look at me funny in the bathroom... But instead of feeling insulted, or even scared, there was just so much good feeling to it. That 'Ok. I kind of want more of this'. And I think that's an indicator too...
I'm not really sure where I fit. But I don't care anymore.

Both Megan and Max discussed a newfound sense of peace within the process of self-discovery. In relying on their own needs and feelings, instead of the expectations projected on them from the worldviews of others, Megan is content for now knowing that they are on a journey toward further self-discovery. They said:

I don't know where it's gonna lead or how it's gonna evolve. But I know it will. It has before this. So why wouldn't it continue to evolve?...
I don't have the answer. And that doesn't really fit with the narrative that most of us are brought up with. And until that's challenged, people don't even realize it...
I'm becoming more comfortable with: 'I don't know'.

Max understands that their gender expression causes people to assume things about them, and that those assumptions usually fall within the binary framework we are all taught growing up. However, Max now relies on the strength and confidence they have built in recent years to stop themselves from looking back with regret. They are open to further change and development, but understand that even as small changes occur, they are guided by a life-long sense of their own identity.

My gender expression has always been authentic. I think I just let people interpret my gender identity however they were projecting onto me...
Sometimes I'm like: "I wish I had done this (come out/transition) when I was younger". But at the same time it's life. It would've been different then, and it feels fine. And I'm not one of those people who looks back at years and thinks that they were awful because I wasn't living my whole true self...
I'm still me. Like, my soul is the same. I've had a lot of forms. So, I don't know. It's a whole life-long process, is how I see it.

The positive feelings and increased internal strength that participants reported came from a sense of finally understanding what their gender meant, knowing that they were not alone, and realizing that the societal pressures they felt were unavoidable but could not change their authentic understanding of self.

Essential Pattern: Cultivating Self-Realization

As evidenced by the significant excerpts in their interviews and the essential themes that emerged from them, the participants in this study showed that their essential experience of the phenomenon of non-binary gender identity was one of cultivating self-realization. Self-realization means that a person is fulfilling their own potential. With regards to gender, cultivating self-realization means that one is taking action to move toward living a life in which the full potential of their gender identity and expression can be realized. This experience of cultivation was marked by the participants' emphasized discussion of the internal recognition of their gender identity as non-binary, the external presentation of their non-binary gender identity in the social world, and a movement toward overall physical, mental, and emotional wellness in relationship with their gender.

CHAPTER 7
DISCUSSION

Implications for Future Research

My hope is that this study might serve as a model for researchers (especially those with cisgender identities) who wish to research non-binary gender identity in the U.S. This study models doing research with, not on, a marginalized community, using the participant's own voices as the basis for knowledge production, and engaging in honest reflection about the researcher's own position. This study also models how to discuss gender, transgender, and gender identity, *without* discussing sexual orientation to the same extent. So much of the past research on gender identity has conflated gender identity with sexual orientation, partly because the LGBT community groups these two aspects of identity together for the purpose of community and social change.

But this conflation is also partly because our current terminology for sexual orientation still mostly revolves around labeling one's own gender (as male or female) and their potential partner's gender (as male or female). Of course the term bisexual invokes a binary categorization of gender, but the terms homosexual and heterosexual (homo- meaning the same as, hetero- meaning different from) are culturally understood within a binary system of men who are attracted to either men or women, and women who are attracted to either women or men. Think of how a non-binary person might struggle to identify their sexual orientation within these confines. If, for example, a non-binary person is exclusively attracted to women/femmes/femininity, how do they describe this? Even though their attraction rests on one end of the spectrum, they are not

gay, straight, or bisexual. And what about someone who is attracted to transgender people or non-binary people specifically? Has such a desire been so far from the imagination of most English speakers that we have not been able to develop our lexicon to include it? This is, of course, where terms like queer come in handy, but they are much less specific if someone is trying to convey what types of people they are attracted to.

These examples represent how gender identity is constitutive factor in one's identification with a sexual orientation label. However, it is clear that one's gender identity exists independently from, and oftentimes before, one's sexual orientation. By studying transgender people's experience of themselves in relationship with gender, not in sexual or romantic relationships with other people, we begin to understand more about the identity formation and inner life of transgender people. This focus also helps to separate transgender people from pathologizing narratives that frame us as sexually underdeveloped or the objects of fetishes. The known history of transgender Americans is relatively young, and researchers have a chance now to represent our community in ways that do not hinder future generations' ability to explore gender and attain authenticity and self-love.

This study can also inform further quantitative research on non-binary identity and inform demographic survey questions so that they best represent non-binary people. Finally, it is my hope to share most of the transcripts of my interviews in a separate database to be used for secondary content analysis research and to be an added source for sharing non-binary experience in a self-authored way. Researchers who are interested in this topic but have trouble finding a sample could use this data as a starting point. At the

very least, this study models how to use they/them pronouns when referring to research study participants.

Implications for Non-Binary U.S. Americans

While, as stated in the previous chapters, phenomenological results can only be read as “suggestive rather than conclusive” (Burdge, 2013, p. 221), this study contributes to research focused on illuminating the experiences of transgender people who exist outside of a binary gender system. The essential pattern of self-realization suggests that transgender identity (so long as it differs from the dominant/majority narrative of sex-gender-alignment) is marked by an experience of self-reflection and a longing for the freedom to live fully and authentically. However, many other factors still determine if self-realization is attainable or not. For instance, if one desires to alter their body in some way to align their internal feeling with their external form, self-realization becomes either deterred or enabled by one’s financial situation. Similarly, as was evidenced in the interviews, living authentically as a non-binary transgender person means the potential for changes in one’s friendships, romantic life, and family, change that is not always positive.

Even if one has the internal fortitude and external support to come out, express, and live openly in community as a non-binary person, there is still a lack of legal recognition for non-binary people in 49 of 50 U.S. states. Since the majority of current research on non-binary people has been conducted within the fields of medicine and psychology, and since medical and psychological experts have in the past advocated for the validity of transgender identity in ways that have changed our legal status, my hope is

that continued research and understanding of non-binary gender identities within these fields will change the daily lives of non-binary people for the better. By conducting this research outside of these fields, I also hope to expand the conversation about non-binary people as part of public life and community into the social sciences in new ways, and to reach an audience of future transgender students and academics.

The participants in this study described their experiences of recognizing their internal knowledge of gender identity and of discovering that people were rejecting the (man/transman v. woman/transwoman) binary. They described the feelings and realizations that led them to reject binary gender categorization for themselves and for society. They shared their experiences of presenting their internal truth to their external environments, for better or worse. They discussed the ways in which their overall well being improved as a result of understanding themselves and expressing that understanding more openly. They shared their hopes for a future in which they can be themselves and fulfill their potential in all aspects of life. While the participants in this study do not represent all non-binary transgender people in the U.S., they paint a very clear picture of the unique experience of cultivating self-realization through the process of discovering and living into one's gender beyond the binary.

NOTES

1. Throughout the course of this document, I use the word ‘their’ in the singular form. While it is considered correct English grammar to use ‘their’ in only the plural form, I use it in the singular because the English-speaking transgender community has recently adopted ‘their’ as a singular gender pronoun and because many non-binary people use this pronoun to refer to themselves. Conjugations of the singular pronoun ‘they’ that occur frequently throughout this text include: them, their, and themselves.

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APPENDIX A
CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

Call For Participants:

Hi, my name is Ashton and I am a transgender masters student at Arizona State University. For the completion of my master's thesis I am looking for five non-binary identified transgender Arizonans who are interested in completing a short survey and a 30-minute in-person interview about their experience of having a non-binary gender. For the purpose of my study, non-binary is defined as "any gender identity that is something other than 'always and exclusively male' or 'always and exclusively female'". This study has received approval from Arizona State University's Institutional Review Board. If you are interested in participating, or have questions about the study, please email me (ashton.skinner@asu.edu). If you are interested in participating, please notify me no later than _____. Thank you!

APPENDIX B
SURVEY QUESTIONS

Ashton Skinner –

Transgender Experiences Beyond the Binary: A Phenomenological Study of Arizonans with Non-Binary Gender Identities

Survey Questions:

1. Preferred first and last name: _____
2. Chosen pseudonym (a first name that will be used to identify you throughout the study & written thesis, not a name you use): _____
3. Age (must be over 18 years old to participate): _____
4. Race: _____
5. List all terms you use to describe your gender identity: _____
6. Preferred pronouns: _____
7. Sex assigned at birth (choose one): [] Male [] Female [] Intersex
8. Contact information (phone number and/or email address): _____

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Ashton Skinner –

Transgender Experiences Beyond the Binary: A Phenomenological Study of Arizonans with Non-Binary Gender Identities

Interview Questions:

Introduction: “I am studying the personal experiences of people who identify their gender as something other than ‘always and exclusively male’ or ‘always and exclusively female’. In this interview, I want to hear your account of how you’ve come to know yourself in this way and what it means to you. The questions I ask will be for the purpose of better understanding *your* experience and there is no right or wrong way to answer them.”

1. Can you describe your gender identity?
2. What makes you describe it in this way?
3. How did you come to identify with your gender in this way?
4. When did you realize your gender identity? Were there certain experiences that informed your realization of your gender?
5. How has your knowledge of your gender identity changed your personal life/relationships/health?
6. Are you currently open about your gender identity? Why or why not? If so, how has this changed your daily life?

Clarifying questions and follow-up questions to elicit deeper descriptions will be given throughout (i.e. “What do you mean by that?” or “Can you say more?”)

APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORM – SOCIAL BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH

Consent Form: Social Behavioral

Title of the Research Study: Transgender Experiences Beyond the Binary: A Phenomenological Study of Arizonans with Non-Binary Gender Identities

Investigator: Ashton Skinner

Why am I being invited to take part in a research study?

We invite you to take part in a research study because you identify with a non-binary gender (that is, your gender identity is something other than always/exclusively male or always/exclusively female).

Why is this research being done?

This study aims to better understand the experiences of people within the transgender community who identify their gender as non-binary (that is, other than 'always and exclusively male' or 'always and exclusively female') as it pertains to their lived experience and daily life. The study will be conducted using phenomenological interview methods in order to get at the self-understanding of gender that participants have as well as the real lived experience of being transgender and non-binary. A few phenomenological studies have been done on transgender people, but none have focused specifically on non-binary or genderqueer/fluid trans identities.

How long will the research last?

We expect that individuals will spend between 30 minutes and two hours total participating in the proposed activities.

How many people will be studied?

We expect about 5 people will participate in this research study.

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

You are free to decide whether you wish to participate in this study. If you do participate, you will be asked to complete a very short online survey and to conduct a 30-60 minute interview with the researcher in-person. The interview will be video recorded to aid in the analysis portion of the study. All video recordings will be safely secured in a password-protected file and will never be released or published. All recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study. All portions of the survey and interview process are voluntary and not mandatory. All personally identifiable data and video recordings will be held in a secure place and destroyed at the end of the study and your name and contact information will never be published. You will be given an opportunity to read the study report/findings and to clarify anything that does not represent you before the study is submitted to a thesis committee for review or publication. You will not be paid in any way for your participation in this study.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time it will not be held against you.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

Talking about your gender identity and your experience with gender may (or may not) be a subject that can be tied to past negative experiences or could bring up painful memories. You should be prepared for any emotions that may accompany discussing these topics and know that the researcher (as a non-binary trans person) will treat the interviews with care, empathy, and respect.

Will being in this study help me in any way?

We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research. However, the interview process will give you an opportunity to reflect on and give voice to your experience with regards to gender, and may prove as a gratifying process in that way.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the University board that reviews research who want to make sure the researchers are doing their jobs currently and protecting your information and rights. All identifying information will be removed from the final thesis.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, you can contact the research team:

Ashton Skinner (ashton.skinner@asu.edu) and Dr. Jennifer Sandlin (jennifer.sandlin@asu.edu)

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Social Behavioral IRB. You may talk to them at (480) 965-6788 or by email at research.integrity@asu.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Signature Block for Capable Adult

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

_____ Signature of participant	_____ Date
_____ Printed name of participant	
_____ Signature of person obtaining consent	_____ Date
_____ Printed name of person obtaining consent	_____

APPENDIX E

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD – SOCIAL BEHAVIORAL APPLICATION

SOCIAL BEHAVIORAL INSTRUCTIONS AND TEMPLATE		
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<p>Instructions and Notes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Depending on the nature of what you are doing, some sections may not be applicable to your research. If so, mark as "NA". When you write a protocol, keep an electronic copy. You will need a copy if it is necessary to make changes. 	
1 Protocol Title	Transgender Experiences Beyond the Binary: A Phenomenological Study of Arizonans with Non-Binary Gender Identities
2 Background and Objectives	<p>Provide the scientific or scholarly background for, rationale for, and significance of the research based on the existing literature and how will it add to existing knowledge.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe the purpose of the study. Describe any relevant preliminary data or case studies. Describe any past studies that are in conjunction to this study. <p>This study aims to better understand the experiences of people within the transgender community who identify their gender as non-binary (that is, other than 'always and exclusively male' or 'always and exclusively female') as it pertains to their lived experience and daily life. The study will be conducted using phenomenological interview methods in order to get at the self-understanding of gender that participants have as well as the real lived experience of being transgender and non-binary.</p> <p>In the Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies (1998) Henry Rubin claimed that phenomenology and transgender studies support each other because the phenomenological method prioritizes the lived reality of subjects through their own understanding and gives voice to people in a socially marginalized position, and because transgender subjectivity requires some self-reflection and negotiation between one's bodily experience and rational knowledge. In 2009, Erica Lynn Idso completed a masters thesis using phenomenology to explore the intimate relationships between couples as one partner goes through a gender transition. In 2014, Barb J. Burdige's dissertation entitled <i>A Phenomenology of Transgenderism as a Valued Life Experience</i> revealed how transgender identity could be a positive part of a person's life informed by a deeper connection to oneself and argued that social workers should have a well rounded view of transgender people.</p> <p>While these studies are important, none gives clear consideration of people within the transgender community who do not wish to transition from male-to-female or from female-to-male. This is the explicit intent of my study.</p>
3 Data Use	<p>Describe how the data will be used. Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dissertation, Thesis, Undergraduate honors project Publication/journal article, conferences/presentations Results released to agency or organization Results released to participants/parents Results released to employer or school Other (describe) <p>Masters Thesis. The data obtained throughout this study will be used for thesis and dissertation work. The study and the results of this study will potentially be sent out for publication and/or conference presentations.</p>
4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria	<p>Describe the criteria that define who will be included or excluded in your final study sample. If you are conducting data analysis only describe what is included in the dataset you propose to use.</p> <p>Indicate specifically whether you will target or exclude each of the following special populations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minors (individuals who are under the age of 18) Adults who are unable to consent Pregnant women Prisoners Native Americans Undocumented individuals

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Include:
 - People over the age of 18 who currently live in Arizona and identify their gender as anything other than "always and exclusively male" or "always and exclusively female"
 - English speakers
 - May include Native Americans and Undocumented Individuals, but these are not part of my target population

Exclude:
 - Minors
 - Adults unable to consent
 - Prisoners

5 Number of Participants
 Indicate the total number of participants to be recruited and enrolled: Five

6 Recruitment Methods

- Describe who will be doing the recruitment of participants.
- Describe when, where, and how potential participants will be identified and recruited.
- Describe and attach materials that will be used to recruit participants (attach documents or recruitment script with the application).

Primary researcher will recruit participants by posting a call for survey participants on various Facebook groups for transgender and gender nonconforming/non-binary people, as well as by inviting personal contacts to participate and share call for participants with their networks using a snowball recruitment method. All survey participants will need to read and sign the consent form before they are sent the survey or scheduled for an interview. The call for participants will begin in June 2017 and will remain open until the desired number of participants has been reached.

7 Procedures Involved
 Describe all research procedures being performed, who will facilitate the procedures, and when they will be performed. Describe procedures including:

- The duration of time participants will spend in each research activity.
- The period or span of time for the collection of data, and any long term follow up.
- Surveys or questionnaires that will be administered (Attach all surveys, interview questions, scripts, data collection forms, and instructions for participants to the online application).
- Interventions and sessions (Attach supplemental materials to the online application).
- Lab procedures and tests and related instructions to participants.
- Video or audio recordings of participants.
- Previously collected data sets that that will be analyzed and identify the data source (Attach data use agreement(s) to the online application).

After signing the consent form, participants will begin by taking an online survey that will take approximately 5 minutes or less to complete. Then an interview will take place for 30 minutes to one hour (one interview per participant) and a follow-up interview will be conducted if necessary for clarification. Interviews will be in person with video recording and will be saved on primary researcher's desktop only. Data collection will take place starting in June 2017 and will remain open until October 2017.

Video recording will be utilized because it is crucial for good phenomenological interview analysis. Sense so much of our communication is non-verbal and the goal here is to get at the essence of the meaning behind how people are describing their gender, their body language will be just as important as their tone and the words they use.

8 Compensation or Credit

- Describe the amount and timing of any compensation or credit to participants.
- Identify the source of the funds to compensate participants
- Justify that the amount given to participants is reasonable.
- If participants are receiving course credit for participating in research, alternative assignments need to be put in place to avoid coercion.

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No compensation. Participants consent to volunteer their time to this study.

9 Risk to Participants
List the reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, or inconveniences related to participation in the research. Consider physical, psychological, social, legal, and economic risks.

Talking about a subject that can be tied to past negative experiences or could bring up painful memories. Talking about a personal identifier that may or may not be public knowledge and that elicits various responses from the public (including some negative and/or violent responses).

10 Potential Benefits to Participants
Realistically describe the potential benefits that individual participants may experience from taking part in the research. Indicate if there is no direct benefit. Do **not** include benefits to society or others.

Opportunity to reflect on and give voice to their experience with regards to gender. Opportunity to represent their community in a research setting. Opportunity to give a first-person account of their identity - which many people in the public are still trying to understand.

11 Privacy and Confidentiality
Describe the steps that will be taken to protect subjects' privacy interests. "Privacy interest" refers to a person's desire to place limits on with whom they interact or to whom they provide personal information. Click here for additional guidance on [ASU Data Storage Guidelines](#).

Describe the following measures to ensure the confidentiality of data:

- Who will have access to the data?
- Where and how data will be stored (e.g. ASU secure server, ASU cloud storage, filing cabinets, etc.)?
- How long the data will be stored?
- Describe the steps that will be taken to secure the data during storage, use, and transmission. (e.g., training, authorization of access, password protection, encryption, physical controls, certificates of confidentiality, and separation of identifiers and data, etc.).
- If applicable, how will audio or video recordings will be managed and secured. Add the duration of time these recordings will be kept.
- If applicable, how will the consent, assent, and/or parental permission forms be secured. These forms should separate from the rest of the study data. Add the duration of time these forms will be kept.
- If applicable, describe how data will be linked or tracked (e.g. masterlist, contact list, reproducible participant ID, randomized ID, etc.).

If your study has previously collected data sets, describe who will be responsible for data security and monitoring.

Primary researcher will have sole access to all data, which will be stored in for the duration of the study (May-December of 2017) after which it will be destroyed. Video files, surveys, and consent forms will be saved and password protected via cloud storage and transcripts will be printed and locked in a cabinet in the researcher's home. All identifiers will be removed from the data at the beginning of the study and the participants' chosen pseudonyms will be used exclusively. All transcripts, video files, consent forms, surveys, and contact information will be destroyed at the end of the study.

12 Consent Process
Describe the process and procedures process you will use to obtain consent. Include a description of:

- Who will be responsible for consenting participants?
- Where will the consent process take place?
- How will consent be obtained?
- If participants who do not speak English will be enrolled, describe the process to ensure that the oral and/or written information provided to those participants will be in that language. Indicate the language that will be used by those obtaining consent. Translated consent forms should be submitted after the English is approved.

The primary researcher will obtain consent before the survey intake process. Once the consent form has been signed, all signed forms will be securely stored in a password-protected account throughout the duration of the study. All participants will be required to speak English.

13 Training
Provide the date(s) the members of the research team have completed the CITI training for human participants. This training must be taken within the last 4 years. Additional information can be found at: [Training](#).

Ashton Skinner – Completed CITI Training on March 5, 2017. Jennifer Sandlin – Completed CITI Training on Feb. 24, 2015.

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APPENDIX F

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD – APPROVAL LETTER



APPROVAL: EXPEDITED REVIEW

Jennifer Sandlin
 Social Transformation, School of (SST)
 -
 Jennifer.Sandlin@asu.edu

Dear Jennifer Sandlin:

On 6/6/2017 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Transgender Experiences Beyond the Binary: A Phenomenological Study of Arizonans with Non-Binary Gender Identities
Investigator:	Jennifer Sandlin
IRB ID:	STUDY00006316
Category of review:	(6) Voice, video, digital, or image recordings, (7)(b) Social science methods, (7)(a) Behavioral research
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent Form, Category: Consent Form; • SKINNER - Call for Participants.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials; • Ashton Skinner IRB HPR-503a, Category: IRB Protocol; • Survey/Interview Questions, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);

The IRB approved the protocol from 6/6/2017 to 6/5/2018 inclusive. Three weeks before 6/5/2018 you are to submit a completed Continuing Review application and required attachments to request continuing approval or closure.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 6/5/2018 approval of this protocol expires on that date. When consent is appropriate, you must use final, watermarked versions available under the “Documents” tab in ERA-IRB.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Ashton Skinner
Ashton Skinner